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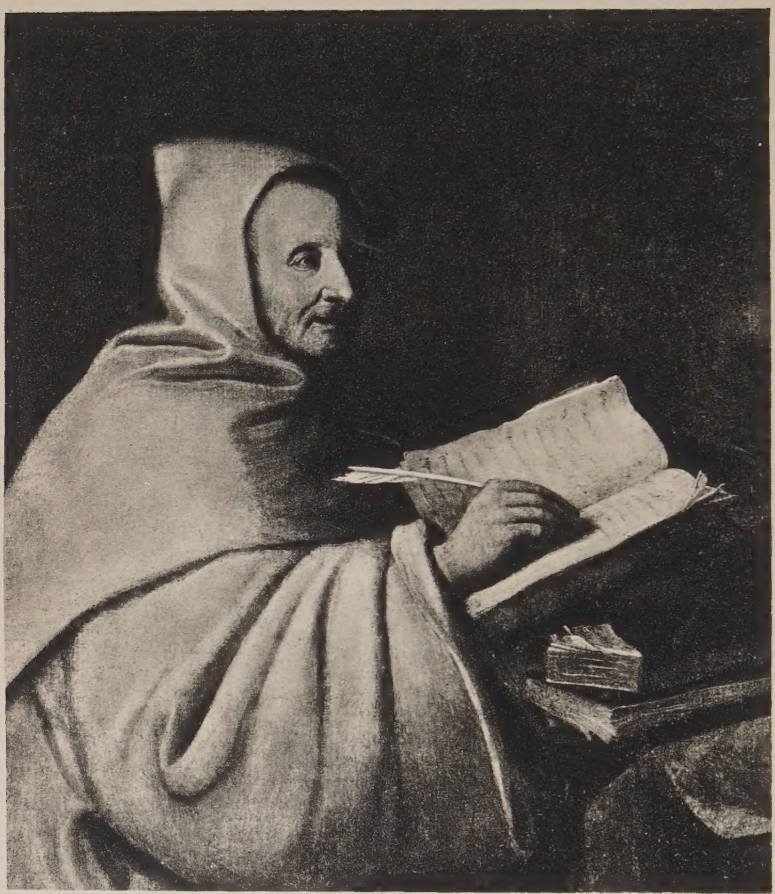
# THE THUNDERING ABBOT



# THE THUNDERING ABBOT

## ARMAND DE RANCÉ
## REFORMER OF LA TRAPPE

BY

HENRI BREMOND
OF THE FRENCH ACADEMY

*Translated by*
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# NOTE BY THE TRANSLATOR

One might express the peculiar quality of this book by saying that a just sub-title would be "A Study in Antipathy." If you retort that that would equally well be the sub-title of practically all modern biographies, the facts are with you. Yet it *is* peculiar here, for in the first place antipathy has not often been the dominant note in one priest's life of another; and in the second place, the object of antipathy in this instance is Armand de Rancé, who by a double title as a great religious Reformer and a great Religious Founder, might well have seemed immune. Yet it is precisely as a Reformer—who was nearly always wrong—and as a Founder—who was below the level of his foundation—that Rancé draws the abbé Bremond's slightly murderous fire.

As a "Reformer" Rancé lacked nothing that could make for completeness: he conformed to all the traditional specifications. He turned from a life of sin to a life of terrifying austerity: he stood out against the decision of the Pope and assailed the corruptions of Rome, the worldiness of cardinals and bishops, the moral teaching of the Jesuits, the relaxed lives of Benedictines and Carthusians, and the decadence of the whole monastic order! Short of losing the Faith, more could not be asked of any Reformer. To accept him is to condemn a large section of seventeenth century Catholicism: which Saint-Simon, Chateaubriand and Sainte-Beuve have done. To prove him wrong in

each instance is to clear the character of the Church of that day—including the Pope, who was quite particularly right. This the abbé Bremond does; and so effectively as to set us wondering how many another assailant of ecclesiastical corruption, particularly in the Middle Ages, might have had his picture rejected if he too had found his abbé Bremond.

As founder of the Trappist reform, he appears not as a great monk but as an instrument powerfully used by God for ends that he never really comprehended. All M. Bremond's admiration is for the heroism of the community whose silent obedience made the Trappist reform possible.

So much for M. Bremond's reading of Rancé's exterior activity. What of his merciless dissection of the innermost soul, with each chapter gradually leading up to and inevitably suggesting the one epithet which yet he will not make his own? As an analysis of a character it is superb. But as an analysis of Rancé's character?—You must judge.

# FOREWORD

For many reasons, most of them easy enough to guess, the abbé de Rancé has so far had very few biographers. The first in point of time is the not very interesting abbé Maupeou, curé of Nonancourt, who in 1702 wrote at the dictation of M. Maine, Rancé's dubious secretary, with whom we are to become more fully acquainted.

Maupeou was followed in 1703 by Marsollier, whose book was of no greater value.

Both were later pulverised by Dom Gervaise, third Abbot of La Trappe, in his *Jugement critique mais équitable des Vies de feu M. L'abbé de Rancé* . . . (Londres (Reims) 1842).

In 1715 and 1719, the Trappists, not satisfied with the first two lives, brought out *La Vie de Dom Armand Jean . . . de Rancé, abbé . . . de la Trappe*, by Père Le Nain, monk and prior of the Abbey, a contemporary of the illustrious reformer and an eye-witness of his actions. My quotations from this book are from the edition of 1719. On the domestic life of La Trappe during Rancé's rule it is, with the *Jugement critique* of Gervaise, our best source. Yet it must not be read with unquestioning confidence: it appeared after the author's death and considerably retouched —particularly as to Rancé's relations with Jansenism.

Then, for a century, silence: till the worthy abbé Seguin ordered Chateaubriand as a penance to write a *Vie de Rancé* (1844). Fortunately this biography was not a biography at all—but that far more valuable thing—a marvellous symphony, by turns amusing and pathetic.

Finally we have the abbé Dubois, whose two enormous volumes became the standard work almost at once, and so remained, for lack of better, for sixty years. The first edition, that in which the author is, so to say, less vigilant with himself—appeared in 1866. It is from this edition that I quote. The second, skilfully retouched, appeared in 1869.

From that date on, I know of nothing that need detain us, except perhaps the recent work of a monk of La Trappe, Dom M. L. Serrant: *L'Abbé de Rancé et Bossuet, ou le grand moine et le grand évêque du grand siècle* (1903). With such a title, we need scarcely say that it is a panegyric—nothing there that is not of the loftiest. In Dubois's two volumes we find something beside: for though, like the other, it is a tireless and unceasing panegyric, it is also quite unmistakably stating a case—it does its anxious best to persuade the bewildered reader that white is black or, to be more precise, that black is white. It had never occurred to Dom Lenain that anyone could conceivably have the least shadow of a doubt as to his hero's sanctity—a blind confidence which, if it sometimes makes us smile, is pathetic too. Dubois, on the other hand, knows quite well all the reasons which put Rancé's canonisation out of the question: knows them, yet canonises him *for* them. For the rest, this highly uncritical work is well constructed and extremely rich in documents of every kind.

We owe to M. Henri Tournouer an excellent bibliography: *Documents sur la province du Perche* (4$^{e}$ series, I and II). *Bibliographie et Iconographie de la Maison—Dieu, Notre-Dame de la Trappe* (Mortagne).

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# THE THUNDERING ABBOT

## Chapter I

## YOUTH

The Bouthilliers came from Brittany: "Their ancestors had discharged the office of cupbearer to the dukes of that country." Bouteiller, Boutillier, and finally the more aristocratic-looking Bouthillier. In the time of Henry III, Denis Bouthillier came to live in Paris, and when he died in 1622 it was as Conseiller d'Etat. He was the best-known canonist of his time: "His house was thronged with bishops, abbots and other ecclesiastics, who came to consult him," and to put their causes in his hands. There, then, is the family, already on the very edge of the Church: they entered by the Golden Gate. For a space they busied themselves in the matter of benefices. With Denis too they acquired armorial bearings—three golden fusils on an azure ground—almost prophetic, if one thinks of the unending fireworks of Armand de Rancé's life. Denis set the family foot in the stirrup. Richelieu did the rest—high offices of state for the one set, ecclesiastical prebends for the other. Soon the Bouthilliers were almost on a level with the de Gondis.

Of Denis's sons, two were bishops. In 1623 Sebastian followed the great Cospean in the see of Aire, ruled it well, and thus provided for asked no more. Victor's appetite was less easily gorged: canon of Notre Dame: abbot-commendatory of Oigny and of Aigues-Vives, bishop

of Boulogne, abbot of La Trappe, first chaplain to the King's brother: finally translated from Boulogne to Tours. On one point his mind was very clear, and the mind of all the Bouthilliers with him: now that these honours and the accompanying revenues had come into the family, they must stay in the family. Uncle Victor was feathering a nest for his nephew Armand.

The youngest of Denis Bouthillier's children bore his father's name and founded the second branch of the family. To distinguish it from the elder branch—the Chavigny—this second Denis "took the surname of Rancé, one of the estates of which he was lord, as he was lord of many others, the most important being the barony of Véretz, in Touraine, which by itself brought him in twelve thousand livres a year. He was the father of the saintly abbot of La Trappe." He had married Charlotte Joly, of whom we know practically nothing save that she was from Burgundy, like St Bernard, Bossuet and Lacordaire: Buffon also for that matter—though even M. Taine would scarcely have tried to draw any inference from that. As to the first three, there is no limit to the dreams one may dream, given limitless time to waste. Rancé is a St Bernard who did—unsparingly and, as he seems to have thought, with the most saintly intent—every single thing that could ensure his not being canonised.

A short while before the birth of the real Saint Bernard, Alette, his mother, had a dream, wherein the treasure that she bore in her womb appeared to her in the guise of a little white dog with red spots, barking mightily. Terrified, she sought the advice of a holy man, who reassured her, so we are told, in these terms: "The child that shall be born of you will be the protector of God's house: he will

be a great preacher and will no way resemble the many faithless dogs which cannot bark." No one certainly ever accused Rancé of inability to bark: but probably there are more ways than one of barking.

All that by the way: let us return to Burgundy, which has more claim on Rancé than Brittany. Before Denis the canonist fixed the family in Paris, the Bouthilliers had for long settled in the Angoumois: three generations at least: to the great detriment, doubtless, of the Celtic strain in them. As impulsive as Lamennais, Rancé was much less compassionate, less obstinate, less rigid, more flexible at need. His troubles with Rome exasperated him, as we shall see, but caused no permanent breach. Yet after all, perhaps, he was a Breton at least in this—that he could not give his heart once and for all to anything on earth, even to glory. The picture of Rancé drawn by Chateaubriand (with the same pencil that he used for his René), if it is not true, is not totally false: it is rather an approximation—and where it is misleading, rather amusing than seriously blameworthy. Great bursts of activity—heroic or merely uproarious—alternating with fits of sheer boredom: in that phrase you have the life of our monk.

Armand-Jean Bouthillier de Rancé was born in Paris on the 9th January 1626. His godfather was Armand, Cardinal de Richelieu: and the queen-mother treated him as a god-child. "She would hold him on her knees, carry him about, kiss him." He was five years old when she went away. Long afterwards he told Dom Gervaise with a smile that Marie de Medicis, like a good Italian, called him her little "Ranqué".

The first plan was to make him a Knight of Malta. Obviously the Church would have been a more valuable

career, had they not already conferred on his elder brother all the benefices which happened to be for the moment in the Bouthillier grip—a canonry of Notre Dame and some rich abbeys resigned to him by his uncle Victor. This child fell ill, and soon it was clear that his days were numbered, a misfortune doubly deplorable, since there was ecclesiastical property to be kept in the family to the tune of ten or twelve thousand livres a year. At all costs, as M. Dubois elegantly puts it, " M. de Rancé had to have a cleric: he found one in his son Armand, and hastened to have him receive the tonsure "—in December 1635. It was a wise precaution. " The abbé François Bouthillier died on September 17th, 1637; the chapter of Notre Dame gave him funeral honours on the 18th; " on the 19th—for if one delayed in such matters there was always the possibility of an unpleasant surprise—on the 19th, in the sacristy of Notre Dame, before the capitular mass, M. de Rancé introduced to the assembled canons their new confrère " the noble Armand-Jean Bouthillier, clerk of the church of Paris, who was immediately received and admitted to the usual oath." Whereupon " having been clad in the insignia of the Chapter, he was solemnly installed, with the customary ceremonies, to the left of the sanctuary in the choir-boys' seats. He was only eleven and a half."

Don't be alarmed: after all, these little canons were dispensed from night office and much beside: they were bound to be present only at the high mass at Notre Dame on the four principal feasts of the year to receive communion. " M. Rancé was so fortunate as to succeed in having the prebends which his eldest son had enjoyed given to his second son. Thus in a short space he was abbot of La Trappe (Cistercian), of Notre Dame du Val

(Augustinian), and of St Symphorien de Beauvais (Benedictine); and prior of Boulogne near Chambord (of the order of Grammont). From 1635 he also held the abbey of St Clement in Poitou. Thus, when he was still too young to render any service to the Church, he was already in the enjoyment of about fifteen thousand livres a year of Church money."

Having on his own private account but a moderate fortune, M. de Rancé pocketed these agreeable sums. Sheer stealing, obviously. Such was the standard of moral delicacy in the *grand siècle*. Even Bossuet, alas. . . . After all, M. de Rancé was only a layman. And in any case it all turned out for the best.

The abbot of La Trappe always had a certain fundamental decency. Long before he had found the courage to restore it to the Church, his scandalous fortune had been on his conscience. It may be that the shame of these heaped-up livings did more to convert him than the death of Mme de Montbazon. "I was so unfortunate," he wrote later, "as to have abbeys when I was ten, being dispensed by Rome from saying office on account of my extreme youth. Judge how great a charge is laid on my conscience."

By way of compensation he was given excellent tutors: two men of Auvergne, as pious as they were learned, the abbé Favier and M. Tinerel de Bellérophon—this last, as his name would suggest, being his Greek master. They began by a master-stroke which was after all, it seems, a stroke wasted.

We must know that Richelieu, a very busy man, was not a model godfather: he forgot the first duty of a godfather—which is to give New Year presents—an abbey, say, or a pension. Besides, he was annoyed with the elder Rancé,

who had been guilty of too great fidelity to the Queen-Mother. So they hit upon a scheme to soften his heart: his godson should produce a critical edition of Anacreon, prefaced by a dedication to Richelieu. The text and the glosses were already prepared by M. Béllerophon. He wrote the dedication in French and had it put into Latin by his pupil.

Let him grow. Soon the abbé de Rancé could read Greek fluently—an accomplishment not common in the France of that day. "No one spoke Latin better than he," Dom Gervaise assures us, and I readily believe it, if only to judge from his beautiful Roman French. His mastery of Latin explains the distaste he felt on his first meeting with scholasticism. Speaking of his first steps in Theology, he wrote to the abbé Favier: "As for St Thomas, I have as much aversion from the crudeness of his language as I have eager inclination for the elegance of the Greek poets." And he continues prettily: "His opinions being very different from mine, I wish to know him only that I may condemn all that does not agree with my view." *His* theological opinions! and he not yet twenty. But there you have him already—self-confident, petulant, looking for quarrels. He scarcely thinks at all save *against* someone, and he is almost always unlucky in his choice of punching-balls. Built as he was, he could not fail to revel in scholastic argumentation.

Too much indignation has been wasted on the fact that he was placed first in his examination for the licentiate: Chamillard was second, Bossuet third. Yet surely it was very reasonable: first a prince of the blood or—in his absence—a gentleman high at court; then a prior of the Sorbonne; then the best scholar. In any case these exam-

inations were not a mere form. The audience would not have tolerated it. There was hot rivalry among colleges—partisanship not for or against the youthful candidates but for or against their tutors. When our abbé was called on to defend his philosophical theses, the reputation of his teacher, the celebrated M. de Chevreuil, had attracted " to this disputation all the old professors of philosophy from the other colleges of Paris . . . armed with all the subtilising of scholasticism, resolved to uphold the glory of their own schools by a total defeat of that of Harcourt." We are told further: " It must be confessed that they pressed the abbé hard. . . . He replied with spirit, but it was clear enough that he was touched to the quick, seeing the obstinacy with which they pressed him without pretence of courtesy. . . . On both sides they grew hot. The duc de Montbazon, the Governor of Paris, and an old friend of the Bouthilliers "—we shall meet him again, or rather his wife—" was present: being annoyed at seeing no end to all these arguments, he rushed forward towards the disputants and began to strike out with his cane like a man trying to break up a street-fight. *Contra verbosos verbis ne dimices ultra*, he said to the abbé. So finished the action." When he got home the duke must surely have said to his duchess: " Our young friend had a narrow squeak: but for me those raving fanatics would have come out on top."

However lightly these gentlemen of the Church took their duties, it is striking to see how deeply they were marked with the Sorbonne stamp. They knew theology almost as well as they knew heraldry: they had read the Fathers; they had at hand their great books of extracts, and the most subtle controversy found them ready. It

may be that with its atmosphere of battle, disputation fascinated those youths—like Rancé—who had now no other way of fighting. In the quarrels which were later to absorb him, his passionate dialectic made him formidable to more serious thinkers: and caused the mass of readers to forget that his learning had more glitter than critical worth and that his mind was rather acute than deep. And then what splendid energy! "I hope soon to be a great theologian. My aim, for the year we are about to begin, is to have no other study than Church history in the Fathers and in the Councils. We shall exhaust the questions on grace and shall get to the bottom of all these new opinions. Especially we shall follow St Augustine. Whatever I do, I am told that I am obliged to wait another two years, before taking my bachelor's degree. Is not that a vexatious regulation? Why measure men's knowledge by their years?" One may readily pardon this charming self-confidence in a man of twenty. The trouble is that he was always twenty.

We know two at least of his close friends—the abbé de Champvallon, François de Harlay, later a great favourite of Louis XIV, beloved of the court and the town, and archbishop of Paris; and the abbé François de Clermont-Tonnerre, later bishop of Noyon. All three aimed at a bishopric. "It is easier," writes La Bruyère, "for a preacher to become a bishop than for the most solid writer to gain so much as a priorship." Our three abbés knew it: and they often met together, by day and night, to read, write, and practise declamation and gesture. These beardless preachers could not contain their desire to show what they could do, and they were often seen—with the necessary dispensations—going from the scholars' seat into the pulpit

—their relations and friends having bestirred themselves to get together a " house " ready to applaud them.

Our Rancé, says Gervaise, " possessed that sort of eloquence which persuades, moves, carries away. His delivery was vehement and full of feeling: in short, he had all the qualities that go to form the perfect orator. He kept them to the end of his life, even beneath the penitential habit. I have never heard a man more capable of swaying you to his will: he had something of that torrent which was so much admired in Père Bourdaloue; but he was more moving and he did not speak so fast."

If he worked hard, he enjoyed life even harder. The abbé de Rancé gave more thought to amusing himself than to becoming a saint: hunting was still his ruling passion. Hence the jesting reply that he made one day to the abbé de Champvallon whom he met in the streets of Paris: " Where are you going? " asked de Champvallon. " What are you doing to-day? "

" This morning," replied Rancé, " I shall preach like an angel: this evening I shall hunt like a devil."

Very clever! It hits off the situation so exactly that if he had not said it, we should have had to invent it—if we could. Gervaise probably got it from Rancé himself, who loved to relate his own *mots*.

" The ordinary slow conveyances were for him a torment unbearable; he was no sooner on the way than he must be at the end of the journey. That is why he ordinarily travelled post." What a pity the halo is not for him! otherwise our motor-cars of today could have had him as a mascot instead of St Christopher. " More than once he was seen, after three or four hours' hunting in the morning, to travel post the same day twelve or fifteen leagues to

defend a thesis in the Sorbonne or preach in Paris, as tranquil of mind as though he had just come from his study. He was as strongly inclined to military exercises as to the chase. One of his greatest pleasures, when he could manage to get away from under his father's eye, was to go off to some young friends with whom he had learnt swordsmanship. Then their one occupation was to fence with one another and to go to the academies for a match and try to disarm some fencing-master's assistant. He was so skilled that he often succeeded: and great was his joy thereat. . . . As he was still but an abbé with simple tonsure, all this was tolerated, but it did not edify."

If he was thus forced to hide his sword-play from his father, with how much more reason—and, incidentally, difficulty—had he to hide other distractions of a less innocent and more expensive sort. As it happened, in this passionate devotion to hunting and fencing, Rancé, all unawares, was giving his future panegyrists a way out of a difficult situation. How much less fortunate the biographers of St Augustine. Take it as you will, there is something about a hunting man!

"One might see," writes Dom Lenain, "a prior, a canon, an abbot spending days and nights, often sleeping in the woods, his head bare, overcome with fatigue, lying in wait for fallow deer." The holy man pretends to be shocked: in fact, of course, he is delighted. He and the other biographers, by spreading themselves with secret complacence on the hunting question, found a way of satisfying the reader's curiosity and making him forget that this turbulent young man must have known nocturnal pleasures other than hunting. Clearly they avoid dotting a certain other i. After all, they had really no knowledge

of these long-past sins save what the saintly abbot had told them. And the Fathers of the Desert had already set the example of speaking more freely of wild beasts than of certain other monstrous things, more dangerous perhaps to meet, more difficult, certainly, to describe with delicacy.

Be it said at once that the scurrilous affirmations of certain pamphleteers, enemies of Rancé, do not prove much. Was he not, writes one, "as much the skilful politician as the perfect lover?" He had, continues this nameless scandalmonger, "several tender passages." It may be so, but the word "tender" is the vague covering of a multitude of relations. Canon Legendre—the secretary, and in this perhaps the echo, of François de Harlay, who knew all that there was to know—says that Rancé "was as much of the world as it is possible to be," and that later he became "as extreme in his penitence as he had once been in worldly pleasures." Not less suggestive in their innocent self-betrayal are the euphemisms of Dom Lenain: "He was much engaged in fine company, frequenting the most dangerous and in all things following the inclinations of youth."

Yet we must be on our guard against twisting too black a meaning from these vague circumlocutions. Real sins there must have been, but it seems to me that they cannot have been as grave as men insinuate, and they certainly did not cause any great notoriety. There is a considerable difference between disedifying frivolities and scandals proper. On this matter of his sins as on so many others, Rancé was master of the art of hinting that he was no mediocre performer. If you take him for a great debauchee in his youth and for a great hypocrite in his maturity, you are

wrong: in plain truth he was never with any definiteness either the one or the other.

"His family nevertheless were perturbed and knew not what to think of this life. . . . He showed no inclination to take Holy Orders. As he was never a hypocrite, he could not make pretence of a devoutness that he did not feel. The life of an abbé (with simple tonsure) in the world pleased him well; it gave him certain privileges that appealed to him; and he saw well that once he made up his mind to the priesthood, he would have to endure certain constraints which were not at all to his taste. From that came all his reluctance to take the next step."

Very excusable: praiseworthy even. His sole vocation was the fear of incurring his father's displeasure, and disappointing the family greed. For like so many violent men, he was weak.

Still, there was no more time to lose. "The archbishop of Tours, his uncle, was growing more infirm. If there were any failure"—to synchronise, so to speak—"this eminent position would escape the abbé de Rancé and the desires of his whole family. . . . It was necessary, then, despite all his repugnance, to make the effort and say yes." So there he is at Saint-Lazare, making his retreat before ordination, under St Vincent de Paul.

"He had to begin by a reform of his outward appearance. For the first time he was seen with his hair cut short, wearing bands and a long gown. There was now no luxury or vanity in his person or in his dress. These sacrifices cost him little; his resolution was taken; he had more trouble to attain that lowering of the eyes and air of modesty which so well become a cleric, but are so much opposed to the life of a hunting man." Still the hunting,

you notice! Indeed we may believe that all this exterior matter—appearance, gestures, words—was mastered soon enough. As for the interior, they probably did their best, M. Vincent having learnt long ago not to ask too much of his not easily manageable penitents. (How for instance was he to persuade them to have only a single benefice?) But the retreat was serious and Rancé's conscience, when in repose, was always open to the stirrings of grace. The personal holiness of the Vincentians probably moved him even more powerfully than their exercises of piety. On that head he wrote to M. Favier a curious letter, wherein we have the pleasure of seeing him pass from merely formal phrasing to sentiments truly felt: "You have too good an opinion of my vocation to the clerical state"—a vocation which had few attractions for himself, but to which he wished to be resigned and thought he was!—"If it is pleasing to God, it is all that I desire: and it is not permitted to us, being Christians, to have any other thought or any other end of our actions than that. . . ." Diplomatic pretence or true resignation, which you please: certainly his heart is not in it. "Being alone . . . I have made a twelve days' retreat at Saint-Lazare, where I found great satisfaction in seeing these worthy men, *who have . . . more piety than they are reputed to have hypocrisy*. It is a true house of God: nowhere else is any to be found like it."

What did he know about it? He had not made an inspection of the other convents of the realm. But as a sort of final shot before his definitive conversion, he could not help passing his censure on the whole Church. And he was very much himself in that delightful mingling of affectionate feeling and mere impertinence—"these worthy

men" whom he had expected to find more hypocritical. (In passing, it is worth noting that the abbé Dubois suppresses the words I have italicised, without indicating any suppression. That is his method—or his notion of the duties of an eulogist. *Ab uno disce omnes.* If for a not very important flippancy of tone, they lop the green branches, what kind of liberties will they take with the dry wood?).

Some time later he again writes to Favier: "Three weeks ago [January 1651], I received the order of Priest from the hands of the Archbishop of Tours. I should have let you know sooner but for a stay I have made in the country." A little dry that: diplomacy would seem to have required something more effusive. But honesty had the upper hand.

Meanwhile the good resolutions made on retreat had gone to join the snows of yester-year. The enemy had no great trouble, writes Gervaise, "in bringing down the new soldier." Here, again, we must be on our guard: there was dissipation certainly: certainly not debauch. Gervaise marks the distinction justly. "We may safely affirm that the life he led after his retreat at Saint-Lazare and continued to lead the whole of the year in which he took Orders was regular enough." Beside which, he was in all the excitement of an examination (1652), and it was by almost imperceptible steps that he resumed his old ways: not that much trace remained of his short outburst of fervour; but his father was there to keep an eye on the harvest—there is no point in putting it less bluntly—and he was afraid of his father.

The death of the elder Rancé in 1653 left him at last with a free rein, in the sole control of his own income

(previously measured out to him drop by drop), as well as two houses in Paris and the splendid barony of Véretz in Touraine. Henceforth he need refuse himself nothing, observe no restraints save those of worldly propriety—which was perhaps rather more exigent at that time than we are disposed to think.

"A violet jerkin of rich material, a fine drawn silk stocking of the same colour; a lace cravat in the height of the fashion; long hair, always well curled and powdered; two great emeralds in his cuffs, and a diamond of great price on his finger—such was then the apparel of the abbé de Rancé. But when he was in the country or hunting, it was a very different matter: there was no mark visible of a man consecrated to the service of the altar—a sword at his side, two pistols at his saddle-bow, a fawn-coloured coat and a cravat of black silk, in which hung a gold ornament. If, in more serious companies, he put on a jerkin of black velvet with gold buttons, he thought he was acting properly and regularly. As for mass, he said it very rarely."

These details, rather picturesque than matter for scandal, Gervaise had from Rancé himself. As he recalled for the benefit of this monk so much his junior the memory of those wasted years, had he other faults to recall of which naturally he would not speak? It may be so; we have no actual knowledge. Certainly, after his conversion, all these lesser vanities—rightly called worldliness, since there is not much of the devil in them—were a cause of incurable remorse. For whether in his frivoling till he was twenty-five, or in his reform of the Cistercian Order from thirty-five to sixty, he was always very much of his age—an age of appearance and the show of things: neither in his sinning

nor in his virtue was there much substance. You see that I press my point: but purely from curiosity and a certain need of seeing things as they are, not from mere advocacy. Rancé is not my client—but for all that I cannot shake off the conviction that the " disorders " of his youth have been greatly exaggerated.

At any rate he was enjoying life to the growing perturbation of his family, who had, of course, no other care than the salvation of his soul. " Towards the end of 1654, the abbé de Rancé's family began to experience very strong anxiety as to the worldly life he was leading in Paris. His uncles and close relations often conferred about it,"—would that we had been there!—" and they agreed that if it came to the ears of the Queen or her spiritual advisers they would not be well-disposed in his favour when it came to a matter of placing the abbé to advantage. Hence they concluded that it would be a good stroke to withdraw him permanently from Paris, in order to break the habits he had fallen into there. The Archbishop of Tours undertook to carry it through. The post of Archdeacon of Outre-Vienne fell vacant, and he immediately conferred it on his nephew, in order to attach him to his diocese and to secure that he should be near him."

But would Rancé let himself be swept off in this fashion? " The position embarrassed him considerably. . . . On the one side, he saw its advantages, not merely because it was a valuable benefice . . . but because it gave him, so to speak, one foot in the episcopate. But certain charms, secret and difficult to break, bound him to Paris, as we shall explain later. He could not make up his mind to depart." In the end, whether from ambition or from mere weakness of character, he yielded—but in his own way.

So we find him Archdeacon of Tours: in which position he did nought but take his pleasure with his friends in his beautiful house at Véretz, which was not far from Tours—not far, either, from the château where Mme de Montbazon sometimes went to rest after the fatigues of Paris. Rancé's first biographer—the abbé Maupeou—would have us believe that in his house at Véretz the young Rancé was "entirely occupied . . . in making hermitages and fashioning monks in clay, some caught up in ecstasy, others . . . spade in hand, filled with God. . . ." On which Dom Gervaise, who is no lover of pious lies, comments: "This sort of thing is an insult to the public intelligence. In fact there was nothing to be seen at Véretz but a steady flow of people of both sexes, drawn there by pleasure, good food and gaming, as well as by the wit and charm of the abbé. No man was ever more skilled in the art of entertaining a company. A thousand diversions were arranged, including "—of course!—" hunting. Nothing was forgotten, save the duties of his archdeaconry. Is all that the fashioning of monks in clay?"

Nevertheless the Assembly of the Clergy was about to open. Forgetful of the dangers which lurk for virtues of the frailer sort in the air of Paris, the Archbishop, ever "obsessed with his nephew's advancement" had him appointed deputy of the second order for the Province of Tours. And so we come to the climacteric years of the tumultuous life we are narrating—1655-1657.

"He has been blamed," groans the abbé Dubois in his introduction, "for his conduct at the Assembly of 1656; it has been said that his bellicose temper betrayed itself there for the first time, and that one might have foreseen from that time that he would never be other than a man

in opposition to all." Is that view in fact a calumny? Yes, if it leaves out of account the altogether noble qualities, the disinterestedness, the dramatic fervour, which go to make a heroic figure of our gallant rebel. But quarrelsome he certainly was. This was his first tilt at the powers that be: and he appears at once chivalrous and turbulent. His ardour would fascinate us if it were not so emplumed with conscious virtue.

It was the time when Cardinal de Retz, violently dispossessed of his see and disowned by Rome as a nuisance, was laboriously knotting the threads of his never-ending intrigues, and from his wandering exile was playing his last cards. He had in the Assembly a fair number of partisans—whose fidelity was quite solid, even if it did not go beyond the reasonably heroic. These, directed by the Cardinal's Parisian agents, tried, according to Père Rapin, to open the eyes of their colleagues " to the extreme indecency of allowing the head of the church in France to wander about like a bandit among the Protestants of the North, and to hide among them like a criminal." It was in fact an intolerable scandal, and would not have been tolerated by an Assembly more zealous for the hierarchy and less given to servility. But beyond a little murmuring in the lobbies, there was nothing more. Mazarin " had made himself so completely master in the Assembly that there was no one bold enough to speak of the affair of Cardinal de Retz, since that was regarded at the Louvre as a state offence. But there was one man dissatisfied with the minister who, having nothing either to fear or to hope from him, undertook as strenuously as could be desired any matter which might annoy him. It was the abbé de Rancé . . . a young man of great promise, who might well

aim at anything by reason of his rare capacity. . . . Joined to these qualities of mind and birth, he had an ambition proportioned to both, and proved to have in him sufficient merit to declare himself, in an assembly which was solidly for Cardinal Mazarin, against his designs and his purposes."

Saving Père Rapin's reverence, don't you rather like Rancé in all this? For Rapin was no friend. Rancé was to pass the best part of his life in abusing the Jesuits, and he had already begun. Moreover, Rapin was a classicist, and a stolid classicist, with so little liking for hot-heads that a chivalrous gesture seemed to him irrational. Yet his evidence, not known to previous biographers, is very precious. Thanks to it, we know that several—including some of the social and religious leaders of seventeenth-century France—were not well pleased at the astonishing prestige that Rancé had gained: their antipathy was of that instinctive sort which easily becomes injustice, but which is none the less charged with significance. We can struggle against it at need—but not always successfully. It is faintly—though only faintly—akin to the opposition of the "world" to the folly of the cross: Bourdaloue, no less thorough a Christian than Rancé, met no such opposition.

He had "mistakenly got it into his head, from the character Cardinal Mazarin bore at court, that the thing to do was not to conciliate but to intimidate him.

"It is true that this line of conduct had succeeded with some [in the time of the Fronde], but it was not safe since the return to power of the Cardinal, who was now so strong that he had no longer anything to fear. So it was that the abbé . . . gained no advantage from the boldness" with which he harassed the cardinal "on every occasion" that he found "of opposing his plans in the Assembly."

So many wasted blows, perhaps, but the adventure would not be less noble for that, if only the arms and the oriflamme chosen by this splendid paladin did not offend something in us that lies deeper than taste. For he did not fight " with ardour, like a young man, but with circumspection and even with a devout air . . . never speaking save with zeal for the interests of religion, and in all the power and pride of a man of the purest intention." That, I imagine, is what decent people like Rapin found it hard to pardon: and I understand them. He reminds us of a certain famous debater who never came down from the platform without having—at least twice in his speech and with a good deal of sound and fury—aired his patriotism, his disinterestedness and his conscience. So with our young abbé. But the higher clergy of 1656 were less cynically hardened than we to oratorical effects.

" The quality of virtue which he always introduced caused him to be listened to with a great deal of patience; for he advanced nothing which was not supported by reason and probity, in such sort that the most servile felt a kind of shame at opposing his sentiments, so much did right and justice appear in them. . . . The Comte de Brancas . . . told me about that time that, the Cardinal having one day stayed to dine with him, the abbé Thoreau, who came to give him the usual account of what had passed in the Assembly, told him that the abbé de Rancé had just been distinguishing himself more than ever on a matter which he was contesting out of pure animosity towards His Eminence. Whereat the Cardinal, for all his affectation of calmness, said with some show of temper: 'It is strange how these men of God spoil everything for us.' For it was always under the protecting shadow of

religion and with the purest maxims of piety, that he attacked the minister. ' Notice,' he continued, ' the conduct of the bishop of Aleth who resists all the king's orders, on grounds of religion. I assure you that all would be lost if he were listened to: the abbé de Rancé is trying to do likewise. I am certain that if the seraphic St Francis . . . were in my place, he would do nothing right.' Those who knew Mazarin would have had no difficulty in recognising his wit in these words, wherein there appears something of the finesse of that Italian mockery which was natural to him and which he could use with such effect."

So Rapin—who after the Greeks and Latins ranked the Italians above all others. About the irony, at any rate, he is right. Rancé a man of God!—the Rancé of those days—and under the same standard as the austere Pavillon! The lady we know of would not have believed her ears and we, for our part, would scarcely have expected so cynical a jest from Mazarin. But after all he was keeping strictly within the limits of his jurisdiction. The *forum internum* was not his business and did not even interest him. Pavillon and Rancé used the same forms of words, the same gestures: it was not for him to seek further. Whence we may conclude incidentally that if the abbé had something to hide, he hid it well. Mazarin's spies had their eye on the opposition's stormy petrel. They found nothing compromising, nothing to distinguish him too outrageously from other worldly-minded abbés. We are and must be less complaisant. This precocious virtuoso with his mimicry of righteousness is an annoyance. Since he had to defend the rights of the Church, he may be excused for using a religious style of speech. But it would have been better had he used it with a little moderation, and avoided certain

accents which belong of right to the saints. We might wish that he had been less determined—or at any rate willing—to draw a portrait of himself so unlike the original: or that he had shown some sign of regret for not being what he seemed.

Come—you say: write it: write the word that is on the tip of your pen! . . . But you are wrong. It would not only be unjust, but even more unintelligent, to make any comparison with Molière's *Tartufe*. Rancé was nearly always sincere—which after all is more than one can expect from the common run of decent men. Whether in speaking of himself or writing of himself—and God knows one or other was a pleasure he seldom chose to forgo—he wished to be, and thought he was, what he described. His pre-eminence lay in not seeing himself as he was.

Independence is sometimes contagious. Thus recalled to a sense of their duty by an eloquence which moved them the more as it grew more temperate, the Fathers of the Assembly decided to send to the Louvre a deputation to urge the recall of Cardinal de Retz in the name of the Church of France. Oddly enough, Rancé was included in the deputation, which was led by the Archbishop of Bordeaux, a man of some prudence. The abbé must have played his part as a man of God marvellously well. They would certainly not have dreamed of including him had they thought him capable—I will not say of bringing down the roof—but even of speaking above a whisper. Alas! after having imposed so rigid a constraint upon himself these many months, he could hold out no longer—and the roof was brought down. The Archbishop of Bordeaux " to whom it belonged, by right of his rank, to act as spokesman, did not dare " (so Gervaise tells us), " whether

from cowardice or from human prudence, to explain matters to Cardinal Mazarin according to the tenor of his commission, but adapted his speech to the intentions of the Minister.

" The abbé de Rancé was horror-stricken at so shameful a deception. He loudly rebuked the prelate for his failure to speak the mind of the Assembly: he called upon the other members of the deputation to bear him out, then acting as spokesman he replied to all the accusations made by the Minister against Cardinal de Retz with such power and freedom that his arguments would have made an impression on any heart less hard than Mazarin's. Mazarin, who was not used to hearing himself so spoken to, could not help showing his resentment—' If one chose to believe the abbé de Rancé,' he said, ' it would be necessary to go before Cardinal de Retz with cross and banner.' He even let drop the remark that the Court was ill satisfied with the abbé's conduct in the Assembly, to which the abbé spiritedly replied that His Eminence must have been wrongly informed of what passed there, since in nothing had he acted otherwise than as a man of honour and integrity." The charming man of God! and the pretty comedy!

This scene having definitely set the court against him—and having more or less lowered his standing with the other deputies—" the abbé de Rancé," says Gervaise, " decided that he must no longer remain " in Paris. " So, under pretext of certain urgent business, he took leave of the Assembly," which was to sit for a few months more. This " flight " is very characteristic of his alternate fury of energy and sheer weakness. First he hurls himself full tilt against the obstacle: then, suddenly limp, weary of himself as much as of the other side, he gives up, melts

away, vanishes into space. Not that he admits himself beaten. On the contrary he invariably has reasons not merely to excuse but even to lend glory to his retreats. It was rather that his heart was no longer in the struggle and that the cause, which till then had seemed to him of supreme importance, no longer held his interest. When he sees his own likeness in this magnificent disillusionment, Chateaubriand is only half wrong.

So went the twofold rhythm of this turbulent life—thunderous affirmation, then desertion: explosion and flight. His flights were of two sorts—sometimes his violence simply died away (as in this case, for instance, or later, when he suddenly abandoned his cause after two months in Rome): sometimes it opened up some new channel—as, when his legitimate work of reformation began to bore him, he declared war on the Benedictines of Saint-Maur.

Yet since he was always under the necessity, even for his own conversion, of exterminating someone or something, the experience that he had acquired in these two years (1656-57) must have played its part in detaching him from the world. What reflections must he not have made, as Dom Gervaise, himself a great fighting man, acutely observes "on all that had taken place in the Assembly! . . . The factions and intrigues, the diversity of cabals, all the tumultuous movements, full of the most violent passions, which he had seen in those with whom he was obliged to live for two years—and above all their morals, so different from what they should have been, greatly diminished, if they did not altogether extinguish, his desire to be a bishop." I need scarcely say that after his rupture with Mazarin, the grapes were too sour for his taste!

But Mazarin was not immortal. A Bouthillier of thirty could wait.

He was writing to one of his friends (April 1657): "I shall act as they do, when I am in their place, and though, from a principle of uprightness and natural justice or from a desire to preserve my reputation as an honourable man, I might save myself from falling into the excesses in which I see them"—this is his ordinary fashion of judging his neighbour—"yet I should have difficulty in not entering into their views and their designs, and in a sense I could not be 'exempted' from doing most of the things they do." Still we must be patient: he has nothing of the Pharisee save the style of speech—but that he has to perfection.

"All these reflections consoled him," concludes Gervaise, . . . "they carried him further. From that time he was seen to lead a rather better regulated life. Such were the first seeds of his conversion. God was shepherding him, by ways imperceptible to human wisdom . . . breaking little by little the chains that still bound him to the world. Having spent the spring of this year in the country [at Véretz], in the pleasures customary with men in the country, he came to Paris in search of others. Paris seemed to him, during the summer of 1657, more charming than ever. His friends saw him back again with pleasure: none of those serious matters, which had occupied him during the Assembly of the Clergy, interrupted the easy tenour of his amusements; the most agreeable parties were held at the house of Mme de Montbazon or in her society: the abbé missed few of them."

Very nicely put! It is enough for Dom Gervaise—a monk, after all—to speak as a Christian and a decent

man. Since he wants at all costs to introduce us to this lady, let us meet her, by all means, and as calmly as may be. Further, and in this matter more especially, Gervaise seems to me an exceptional guide. The principal details of the story we are about to set down came to him, as I have strong reason for believing, from Rancé himself. And his honesty is inflexible. When the abbé speaks as a teacher—and to the gallery—of his past faults, " monstrosities " as he called them, he yields to the temptations of eloquence. He exaggerates evil and good alike. And whether as penitent or as sinner, he desires pre-eminence. Alone with Gervaise he naturally comes down from his high horse. He relates honestly, he does not preach, he observes only the necessary reticence. Gervaise for his part avoids ill-sounding and useless questions. After all Mme de Montbazon was now long dead. The abbé's memories, though still very clear, have lost their bitterness. Pardoned, tranquillised, emptied of its thrill, his romance no longer afflicts him but rather amuses and even pleasantly flatters him. He can savour its piquancy with a certain complacency. Yet for auld lang syne . . . Gervaise had remained, under his habit, a man of the world, which pleased M. l'abbé de la Trappe. At certain passages whereat Dom Lenain would have blushed like a schoolgirl—and which later were to be a horrible embarrassment to the simple abbé Dubois—Gervaise did not so much as turn a hair.

## Chapter II

# Mme DE MONTBAZON AND THE CONVERSION OF RANCÉ

"Mme de Montbazon was the daughter of Claude de Bretagne, comte de Vertus. At the age of sixteen she had married Hercule de Rohan, peer and Master of the Hounds to the King, Governor of Paris, &c. . . ." Many years her senior "this nobleman was already a widower with several children—among them the famous duchesse de Chevreuse . . . who had so great a part in the troubles [of the Fronde]. As soon as the young duchesse de Montbazon appeared at court, she eclipsed in beauty all those who made beauty their boast."

Contemporaries are unanimous. "The most beautiful woman in the world," affirmed either the Maréchal d'Hocquincourt or Saint-Evremond. "At the ball she outshone all the others," writes Tallemant. "A very great beauty," according to Cardinal de Retz, who detested her: "I have never seen a person who has preserved in vice so little respect for virtue." Her beauty was of the Rubens sort. "She was magnificent," said Tallemant elsewhere. "Her admirable impressiveness," says Loret. De Retz adds this more suggestive phrase which impresses us, somehow, as entirely just: "Her expression lacked modesty." The delicate M. Cousin did not find her to his taste. "She possesses in all their luxury the charms of *embonpoint*," as he deliciously phrased it. "The fault," he continued,

"was a nose somewhat too strong, with a mouth too deep set, which gave to her face an appearance of hardness"—Mme de Longueville had rendered him exigent, or maybe Mme Colet. Père Rapin, from whom we might have expected more gallantry, said that, "At the age of forty-six or more, she was still more beautiful than ever." And we have the lyric enthusiasm of Loret:

> Ce miracle d'amour
> Approchant de son dernier jour,
> Faisait en cent lieux dire d'elle:
> Ah! qu'elle est belle! Ah! qu'elle est belle! . . .
> Le temps augmentait ses appas
> Ou ne les diminuait pas.

To these advantages "she joined a fine and delicate intellect, capable of much learning and the most excellent conversation, and it must be confessed that she had little taste for any other sort. . . . M. de Montbazon died in 1644, aged eighty-six: his widow was at that time thirty-two and looked no more than twenty. The elder M. de Rancé had been among her husband's close friends . . . and M. de Montbazon looked on his friend's children as his own—whence the affection he had for the abbé de Rancé. (We remember that at the time of the philosophical theses, the duke hurled himself cane in hand against the examiners.) There is then no reason for astonishment if the abbé had already the entrée to Mme de Montbazon's house."

"The young widow, seeing herself set free from the yoke of marriage, allowed herself a little more liberty"—"a little" is charming.—"Her house became the rendez-vous of all the finest minds in Paris. There they had gaming, brilliant conversation, a thousand diversions. The abbé de Rancé, then aged nineteen or twenty, was already

a visitor and distinguished himself by his wit, by his easy and polished manners, by that salt which was in all he said, by a thousand qualities which charm the world in spite of itself. Even so early he had the gift of pleasing Mme de Montbazon, and she knew how to draw a distinction among the people who frequented her house, though all were of the *élite*—she admitted no others. In vain countless adorers of her beauty wished to introduce themselves: after one or two visits they saw clearly that, having nought but birth and wealth, their labour was wasted."

"The elder M. de Rancé having died and the mourning being at an end, his son the abbé, now head of the house . . . let himself go. . . . A greater train . . . eight magnificent carriage horses, a most gallant livery, a table to match. His attentions to Mme de Montbazon increased likewise. He often spent his nights gaming either with her or in her house. He was in the habit of staying there for supper. She used him also for her business affairs—a young widow needs this kind of help. This familiarity made many jealous. People thought of it and said of it what they pleased—perhaps too much, more than was really in it. The world is not too kindly and at all times it inclines easily to slander."

"It is true that of all those who made their court to Mme Montbazon, the abbé de Rancé was the one who had the highest place in her friendship, who entered most fully into her confidence and who was able best to recommend himself to her. But also he was a true and efficient friend. On several occasions he was able to render her considerable service. Gratitude demanded of her that she should treat him with distinction. For the rest they were always very careful of appearances: they avoided

even entering the same carriage, and during the more than ten years of their intimacy, they were seen to do so only once—and even then they were in such company that nothing could be made of it. Thus there is some ground for thinking that the mind had more part in this friendship than the flesh."

An admirable story, advancing so quietly, swaying the balance ever so slightly: could you have in more harmonious mingling the affection of the disciple and friend, the discretion of the gentleman, the healthy curiosity of the historian, the disapproval of the priest? Dom Gervaise is surely more clear, more open—and in that more skilful—than Rancé's eulogists.

These others betray their anxiety all the more for their desperate pretence that they feel none. "What was the nature of this liaison?" wonders the abbé Dubois. "Did it stop at the last limits of duty, on the chaste borderland of spiritual friendship, according to the expression of St Augustine? Everything leads us to think so." Was she not "more than fifteen years older than he? She was like his second mother"—apparently he *might* have fallen to less mature sirens! "We believe that he had nought to fear as regards the duchess, but was it the same as regards the company that grouped about her?" Not very clever, that: after all she or another makes no great odds. We are told that hares, once they are between two rails, hypnotised to right and left, cannot stop running!

A learned Trappist of our own day, Père Serrant, has unearthed a little slip of paper wherein it is affirmed that she "never loved him save as a friend and not as a mistress." On which he joyously argues: "Indeed, had it been otherwise, the duchess would not have failed as was her

custom to boast of a new conquest; and for his part the abbé de Rancé, with his temperament, would not long have consented to play the rôle of Misanthrope to her Célimène, and to tolerate rivals about her": that is to say, "We know that he was altogether unmanageable and would have made some blunder." But surely—has not Gervaise written that she had distinguished him beyond all others? And as to the unsigned slip of paper, would it, do you think, have reassured the terrible d'Hocquincourt, the disappointed rival who said—"The lovely woman was beginning to be cold to me. . . . There was always with her a certain abbé de Rancé, a little Jansenist, who spoke to her of grace before others and conversed with her in very different manner in private." Notice by the way that even before his conversion, he was taken for a hypocrite—a calumny, as I have said, but deeply rooted. Still one may say that the evidence of d'Hocquincourt, though to some extent corroborated by Saint-Evremond, is not proof. But after all what are we called upon to decide? What difference can it make to us whether Rancé, during these wasted years, crossed or did not cross "the chaste borderland of spiritual friendship?" It has been said that Gervaise "passes what amounts to a condemnation on the nature of this relationship": Yes and no. Yes, because he calmly sets out arguments on both sides; no, because by this very calmness he invites us not to meddle with what is not our business. Chateaubriand is here less excited than we might have expected. "We cannot deny," he writes, "relations which history attests." But what is denied of these relations or what is held as uncertain, history has had no means of finding out. She was not there at the critical moment! After this Chateaubriand lets himself go, with the oddest effect:

"A frank avowal would have set Rancé free of the calumny for ever. He was not directly accused of the fault, it is true, for, in that case, it would have been necessary to accuse the whole world . . . Yet we must say, the silence of Rancé is terrifying, and casts a shadow on our minds. A silence so long, so deep, so unbroken, stands before us like an impassable barrier. What! a man could not betray himself for a single instant? Silence should be able to pass for truth? This empire of a mind over itself is terrible: Rancé was to say nothing—to carry his whole life with him into the grave."

Come now, where is the miracle? Would Chateaubriand have liked a public confession? Do we not knock our heads against these impassable barriers every day? Rancé is not the only sinner who has shown some control of his tongue. Between Rancé and Rousseau, which is the eccentric?

Things were in this state—whatever it might be—continues Gervaise, "when the abbé came from his house at Véretz to Paris, to spend the summer of 1657. Never had he made such progress in Mme de Montbazon's favour. Apparently everything was going well for him, but it was at this moment that God was awaiting him and it was then that He struck that final blow which was to bring him to the dust and break for ever the deadly chains which till then had held him in shameful bondage."

Towards the very end of April, he suddenly learnt that, stricken with a malignant fever, she was beyond hope. He ran "to her bedside and did not leave her till the last moments. We can judge of his grief. Yet he had the courage, when everyone refused, to tell her the danger she was in. What a shock for this lady to hear her death

sentence pronounced by the lips of her best friend! . . . After a few minutes' conversation, her resolution was taken to think only on death and on the terrible reckoning of a life so void of good works."

Is all this certain? They were alone and we know of this scene—perhaps the most awful of all—only what Rancé allows us to know. For myself, it seems obvious that he would have concealed from us, of all the circumstances of the death, that one which had caused him most horror and which must therefore—more than any other, more even than her death itself—have brought about his conversion. It is no more than a guess, yet a likely guess, that receiving from those lips the terrible message, the sick woman, but yesterday so full of life, revolted violently. We know that Rancé, with his eloquence and his pathos, was a wonderful influence at death-beds. He was sent for in difficult cases, and it is to his credit that in the midst of his dissipations he should have applied himself so zealously to so mournful a task. Yet those whom his pious compassion helped to face death were not used to receiving from him suggestions of so different a kind. They would see in him only the priest. But what a contrast here. With what feelings of horror, with what passionate irony must not Mme de Montbazon have looked on the metamorphosis—official in a sense, yet frantically sincere? And reduced to this heart-breaking helplessness, even perhaps repulsed again and again, must he not have seen her as damned—damned too by his own fault? A guess: but it would cast a flood of light on the strange upheavals that were to follow.

In order to prepare for death "with less distraction, she charged the abbé with the care of her temporal affairs,

and by the advice of this faithful friend, she entrusted the care of her soul to her pastor, the curé of Saint-Paul. The time was short but it was put to good use. The skill of her director, the Christian dispositions which he found in the sick woman, the death which she felt approaching, did more than they had had reason to hope. Everyone in the house was in tears, seeking consolation from the abbé de Rancé who himself had more need of it than any other. Occupied with the affairs which she had entrusted to him, he came to her bedside from time to time. The fifth day of her illness"—Dubois, who seems to be more accurate, makes it the third, April 28—" having left her about two in the morning to take a brief rest, he returned three hours later. He was mounting the stairs when M. de Soubise (Mme de Montbazon's son) who was coming down, met him and said in a tone not uncommon with courtiers: "'It is all up, abbé, the farce is over!'" Mme de Montbazon had just died.

You must admit that they do not spare us shocks. Gervaise certainly is surprised at nothing. Expert or not in the fine manners of the courtier, a son does not announce the death of his mother, almost in the moment of her dying, quite like that. The most cynical of romancers would not invent such words: still less Gervaise—who in any case could have learnt this, directly or indirectly, only from Rancé.

The farce is over! "These few words pierced M. de Rancé's heart; he fainted" ("he nearly fainted", corrects Dubois, who thinks that a man should faint outright only at the death of a mistress), "and he had to be taken back home. Soon after, the curé of Saint-Paul came to see him, and the witness he bore to the feelings of penitence and

compunction wherewith it had pleased God to favour this lady in the last moments of her life were no small consolation to the grief which overwhelmed him." So that he had to be reassured on this point, he who, so they tell us, had scarcely left the dying woman! The whole story has a certain incoherence. "On that very day he took post"—odd haste!—"and withdrew to his house in the country, to find there in silence and solitude the consolations which he needed, but which no creature was capable of giving him. That is the true story of what took place. All that previous historians have added are but fables without the least foundation."

Among these fables, so cavalierly swept aside by Gervaise, that of the severed head is the most important. The subject is obviously somewhat grisly, but it cannot be passed over for that. The most unpleasant—and most widespread—version of the fable—if it *is* a fable—is first found, so we are told, in the pamphlet of 1685 which I have already had occasion to cite—"*Les veritables motifs de la conversion de l'abbé de la Trappe . . . ou les entretiens de Timocrate et de Philandre sur un livre qui a pour titre: les Saints devoirs de la vie monastique.*"

According to this pamphlet, which caused an extraordinary sensation at the time of its appearance, Rancé learned at Véretz the sudden danger in which his friend stood: this at any rate is an invention, and a mere advocate might claim it as sufficient reason to dismiss the whole story out of hand. He took post immediately and "going straight up to her room, which he was free to enter at all times, the first thing he saw there was a coffin, which he judged to be that of his mistress, since he saw her head all bloody which had fallen by accident from under the cloth."

It had had to be severed from the trunk, explains the author of the pamphlet, as the joiners had made an error in the dimensions of the coffin. There was of course an immediate outcry on all sides—the story was improbable, false, calumnious. "On this isolated fact, let drop by a Protestant (?) pen, there has fallen an avalanche of maledictions," says Chateaubriand, who conducted his little enquiry like a professional critic.

A distinction must be drawn between the incident and the venomous exploitation of the incident. Such an accident, for all its rarity, is not so utterly improbable, and in any case it has no bearing either direct or indirect on Rancé's character. Supposing he had been as innocent as a new-born babe, he might equally well have come upon the same sight. Vigneul-Marville, we are told, rejects the anecdote as entirely apocryphal. There is not a word of it in the letter wherein Guy-Patin as a doctor explains her death. In short, "all contemporary authors," says the abbé Dubois, "not only serious writers but chroniclers, gazetteers, novelists, preserve the same silence. It is only thirty years later, when all who could contradict the story are dead"—incidentally Rancé was still alive, and Mme de Montbazon's children and other close friends of the family —"that Larroque [supposed author of the pamphlet] by a private revelation learned what no one before him had known or suspected." Well done: and if the nameless pamphleteer had really been the first to tell the story, it would not merit discussion. But alas! he was not the first. Before him—and much heavier metal—is Père Rapin. This is his version as it is found in the second volume of his *Mémoires*, written, we know not at what date, but certainly before the pamphlet, and obviously not drawn from the same source.

" Shocked by the news of her death, he ran, we are told, with a haste which prevented him from taking any precautions "—a valuable word, this last. " The duchess, who had just expired and who had already been placed on the *paille* for burial, was the first sight that met his eyes. This woman, the most beautiful at court two days before, looked to him so frightful . . . that he was as though thunderstruck. . . . Some push the story further: for they affirm that the duchess's surgeon having cut off her head the more easily to embalm her body . . . this head was what first was seen by the abbé. . . . It is said further that he was so strongly moved by so hideous a sight that he had now only disgust for the world. . . ."

With his " we are told " and " they affirm ", Rapin in no way guarantees the story. He was not there. He simply reports a rumour current in the salons immediately after the event. The death of this Queen of Beauty must have come as a thunder-clap, yet not a totally unpleasing thunder-clap, for the world she had occupied. What with disappointed lovers, eclipsed rivals, pious souls scandalised (or making a very fair pretence), tongues could not have ceased wagging for three weeks. Nor was " the other " forgotten. Curiosity was fixed on him—some pitying, more in malice, all alike indiscreet. He was the hero of a tragic story, and everyone wanted to know or to guess all that was to be known or guessed of his emotions, his actions and his gestures, before, during, and after. " The haste which had prevented precautions "—this shot goes home, it was not imagined by Père Rapin. What, they said, was the abbé then, so very careful of the proprieties, unable to keep himself away from her death-bed! The crowd in the house, servants, doctors, surgeons, friends come to

enquire—they must have reconstructed the whole scene shred by shred. And he had fled, poor wretch, without waiting for the funeral: really one would have thought him less sensitive, less liable to lose his head. . . . We can see how the legend grew: yet it would seem that it did not grow from nothing.

So we have two versions: one says the surgeons: one says the carpenters: both say the severed head. Rapin's version must be the older: it was in circulation as early as 1657. Very oddly, Saint-Simon dwells only on it, though he must have read the pamphlet of 1685. He wanted to get at the precise truth, and addressed himself to the abbé, who had a real affection for him, and of whom, for all his youth, he might ask practically anything.

" This story has been told," he writes, " and has found credence . . . that having suddenly rushed into her room, the object on which his eyes fell was her head, which the surgeons had severed. There is no truth in it, *but only circumstances which have given colour to this fiction.* I asked M. de la Trappe quite openly—not crudely about his love, still less about its success—but simply as to this fact, and here is what I learned of him."

Naturally you prick up your ears—for nothing. " And what did he learn? " asks Chateaubriand. " The authority would be decisive, if the reply were categorical." But no: he turns aside and, instead of saying what he means, he talks of Rancé's relations with the notabilities of the Fronde. For the rest, he states, with Dom Gervaise, that Mme de Montbazon was swept off by *rougeole*—there had been other rumours—that Rancé was by her side, that he did not leave her and that he saw her receive the sacraments. As to

the "fact"—the head—not one word more. Obviously we should not have expected, from Saint-Simon or Rancé, anything in the nature of a judicial pronouncement: a mere hint would have sufficed between them. Very much embarrassed by his own audacity—not without reason, either—Saint-Simon must have asked rather as to the story as a whole than as to the details of this quadruply scabrous incident. And Rancé, on his side, must have given his contradiction *en bloc* and not to this or that detail. Anyhow it remains that they both admit that certain "circumstances have given colour to this fiction."

This nucleus of truth lost in a cloud of invention, this fire in the heart of so thick a smoke, will presumably never be known to us. Probably there was some frightful mischance to do with the coffin or the embalming-table—some nameless terror from coming suddenly upon the dead face: one thing stands firm: whatever did happen, whether or not it was as charged with horror as the story, it was at least sufficiently so to set the careless soul of the young abbé rocking on its very foundations. Cruel as it may have been, mere grief at the separation would ill explain the convulsions which were to follow, for we may be sure that Gervaise added nothing in the telling.

"The utter prostration of mind and body in which the abbé found himself on his retreat show that solitude is not always a very good means of soothing great sorrows. He abandoned himself to his grief with so little control that it was thought for some time that he would lose his reason. A dark and sombre melancholy took the place of that gay and pleasant air which he had always borne up to the fatal moment. The night was unbearable: he passed his days in ceaseless bitterness of spirit, wandering about alone in

the woods by the side of streams and pools, often calling by name on one who could no longer reply."

It seems to me that these are not the ordinary tortures—traditional, as it were—of love in despair. There is something beside.

"The study he had formerly made of the secrets of nature recalled to his mind the means used to bring back the dead and force them to speak to us. Obsessed with the desire to see Mme de Montbazon, to speak with her a moment, he wished to make use of these means: but without effect. Nothing appeared, not even in those dark and lonely places wherein he had read that spirits take delight. Thus the vision of a woman up to her waist in a pool of fire uttering dreadful cries . . . is only a story, as ill invented by the curé of Nonancourt [Maupeou in his *Vie de Rancé*] as it is ill told. Everything leads us to believe on the contrary that God, who put such Christian dispositions in the heart of this woman before her death, was merciful to her."

Another quarrel about the hapless dead! Was there ever such a swarming of stories? This once, I incline to disbelieve Gervaise. I do not believe that he is deliberately trying to hide from us anything whatever. But he may easily have lost his way among Rancé's fragmentary confidences, for want of knowledge of the central secret. I do not of course dream of consigning Mme de Montbazon to hell: but I am more than tempted to believe that in these waking nightmares Rancé saw her there. All is not equally untrustworthy in Maupeou's book. It is a biased work, untruthful certainly on this or that detail, for it was written at the dictation of an untruthful man, Rancé's secretary, M. Maine. But on the facts which his employer had no reason to dress up, we may within limits

trust Maupeou. During his long years of service—or rather domination—Maine did bit by bit secure much information. He may well have coloured the hallucination we are concerned with: there is no certainty that he invented it. Remember the unpleasant conjecture I have already hazarded—that the dying woman received the exhortations of the abbé with an explosion of rage and unbelieving sarcasm. This mood of rebellion lasted longer, perhaps, than Gervaise knew. It is certain enough that it was followed by resignation. But this conversion *in extremis* was not perhaps sufficiently reassuring to calm Rancé's despair. We may then at least conjecture that the scene by the dead body, after whatever fashion it occurred, must have redoubled the agony of mind of this priest who could only repeat to himself a thousand times: "If I had been what I should have been, she would not be in hell." At Véretz he sought her, called for her; to bring her back he had recourse to the tricks of magic. It was not love that impelled him to these extravagances that he might merely look upon her once more. It must rather have been frantic remorse, that he might know where she was—or was not.

"Time, which levels all things and soothes the bitterest griefs, calmed the abbé's transports and made him more reasonable. God who had great designs for him, made use of this prostration . . . to lead him to more solid and more Christian reflections. His faith awoke again and, as it showed him the uncertainty of things here below, the rapidity with which they pass away, he saw clearly that it was only in God that one could find true happiness. Then the world became a burden to him. He knew better than ever its vanity and nothingness. More than three months

passed in ceaseless fear of the judgments of God, who in this solitude finally brought him to his knees." Mme de Montbazon he no longer saw in the pool of fire; he hoped and believed that God had shown her mercy. From now on it was the thought of his own salvation that obsessed him. Rancé's dead pass away as rapidly as others, if not more rapidly. According to his eulogists, this rapidity would of itself suffice to prove that what is called their love was only the love of friends. From the whole of his past, say they, nothing was to trouble him save "the noise of the hunt passing through the forests near his monastery. At those times he would seek . . . the most secluded rooms that he might no longer hear the sound of the horns and the baying of the hounds." I do not think myself that the shade of Mme de Montbazon greatly tormented the overstrained and intrepid reformer whom we are soon to find at La Trappe. His voice was not choked with sobs as he spoke of her to the stealthy M. Maine, the discreet Dom Gervaise, the indiscreet Saint-Simon. He wrote letter after letter of direction to Mme de Vertus, sister of his one-time friend, and his hand did not tremble. In one of his early letters he has a delicious phrase. Of his brother-in-law, the comte de Belin, recently dead, he writes: "I weep for him every time I think of him." Even before La Trappe, did he often weep for Mme de Montbazon?

With its taste for the romantic thus whetted, the imagination would wish that Rancé had made but a single bound from Véretz to La Trappe, his first despair having yielded to the generous enthusiasm of the great penitents. But no: he was to wait six years more before going to bury himself in the desert. And it is better so. Never again

will he appear less impulsive, more wise, than during this long period when he was hesitating—no longer between bad and good but between good and better. Transformed he truly was, once and for all. His conversion was no flash in the pan. Deep down it was working upon him for a long time. He knew that sooner or later he would have to go. He was waiting without too much impatience for the coming of the courage to break his chains.

After all, the half-involuntary blindness of his biographers, when they try to persuade us that Rancé had no true passion save for the chase, may well be a deeper vision than the malice of the world.

Disillusioned from birth, his other adventures—even that which by its terrible *dénouement* caused him so violent a shock—diverted rather than possessed him.

Saint-Simon, the direct echo of Rancé, has truly said: "He was already wavering between God and the world, already for some time meditating retreat, and the reflections occasioned in his heart and mind by this sudden death completed his resolution."

His resolution to what? To a decent life first; then to heroism, if there was no way of avoiding it. And would to God that Rancé had not in the result reversed this order of moral values. Having begun by reforming all that had been most intolerable in his conduct—which he did overnight!—he decided that his first duty was to retain no more than one of his numerous benefices. Which should this one be? And to whom should he resign the others? The choice in both cases took time, but at least the decision to make the choice was come to very quickly. Not that all the advisers of our new convert saw eye to eye with him about it. Why should he strip himself in this way—asked

his friends at Port-Royal—a pleasing detail which we have from Rancé himself: would it not be better to apply these great revenues to good works—Jansenist good works, for instance?—this likewise we have from him.

Others made a greater outcry. Why flout so publicly a usage already venerable, a little dubious in its origin perhaps, but to-day canonised in a sort of way by the practice of so many pluralists. They little knew their Rancé. Had he, do you think, waited till his conversion to wave the banners of conscience? We may recall that astonishing letter he wrote between two visits—two hunting-parties to be precise—wherein he grandiloquently confessed his fear lest, if some day ecclesiastical honours were to come his way, he might yield to the dreadful example of the higher clergy and give way to the same excesses. Now that he is actually *practising* what he had preached, think you that he is likely to lower his voice? When I have finished sulking, cried Achilles, they will see the difference. Our Rancé remains defiance-made-man. He can make no statement save by way of an attack. Why be surprised? Grace takes him and uses him, just as he is, " old man " and all. After all he had made up his mind to fairly solid sacrifices: it will be time for us to preach to him when we have thrown fifty thousand livres a year out the window and exchanged the myrtles of Véretz for the swamps of La Trappe. Let us leave him his unsheathed sword. He has closed his ears to the horn of the huntsman: let him at least hear his own trumpet.

There are two noteworthy incidents—one which might have been pathetic enough, if from now on we had not ceased to be on speaking terms with tenderness: the other more comic.

The first is set out for us with a certain timid and somewhat solicitous unction by the worthy Dubois. "He had need of a master to instruct him, a guide to direct him, a help to sustain him. He cast his eyes about, looking for an Ananias, and he found no one": not, be it noted, that there was any dearth of saints at the time, but Rancé could never manage to find any, save in history. They seemed to have gone on strike after St Bernard.

"A fall then was not eternal: sinners, fallen, rose again and, scarcely arisen, held out their hand to others fallen beside them, and assisted them to recover with all the gentleness and charity of which they had themselves known the need. There was at the Convent of the Visitation at Tours . . . a young woman, another Magdalen, escaped from the world and its corruption. She was called in religion Mère Louise, in the world Louise Testu le Roger de la Mardelière. . . . Very much sought after in her youth by reason of her beauty, she had not, alas, been able to resist all seductions, and she had had, by Gaston d'Orléans, a son, the Comte de Charny, of whom Mlle de Montpensier took the greatest care, as of her natural brother."

"Louise was dark, shapely, pleasant of face and of great intelligence." Rancé must have met her more than once at the house of the King's brother, to whom his uncle was first chaplain, but when he became himself holder of this charge (1656) Louise was already at the convent. There is no great distance from Véretz to Tours. After the upheavals we know of, it is pleasing to think that Rancé's first visits were to Mère Louise. In that quiet parlour, neither his vanity, which was already threatening to react, nor his impatience, nor certain more delicately intimate feelings could have aught to suffer. She was not

of a sort to press too heavily on the sins of the past, nor to put any strain on a submission which she knew to be ephemeral. We know well enough that from now on Rancé never had any other spiritual director than himself. Of all those whom he was to make a show of consulting during this long period of hesitation, it was only in the Visitandine that he showed any confidence. One fancies even that there is to be traced a sort of *abandon*, a genuine simplicity in the letters which he wrote her right up to the time of his departure for La Trappe, in which he keeps her informed of his waverings. She had sent him to her own confessor, the Oratorian Séguenot, a humble pastor who had no taste for shepherding lions. Far from chaining this splendid but turbulent capture to his chariot, he did not rest till he had passed him on to others. Nor was there any lack of applicants. Already that pushful person, Robert Arnauld d'Andilly, had thrust forward. But to my infinite regret, I can only skim that comic episode—the siege of Rancé by the Jansenists.

All that is penitent is ours, they thought: or, if you prefer, there are no true penitents but we. We have found the formula. Since the abbé dreams of solitude, Port-Royal is the obvious place. Let us once ally his prestige with ours and the Jesuits will have to behave. And indeed appearances flattered these vast hopes. To abandon himself to them, the abbé had only to follow his own bent. Not, of course, that his formal orthodoxy was in question. Along with his colleagues of the Assembly of the Clergy, he had just signed the formulary—a saving gesture which was to serve him as a lightning-conductor when later his enemies denounced him to Louis XIV as one attached to the sect. Yet for all that, in mind and temperament he was

as much of a Jansenist as a man could be without actually being one. His own inclination never altered as to that. He had the same friends and, what is more to the point, the same enemies. Tell me whom you cannot bear, and I will tell you what you are. While still a student he had stigmatised the unclean devices of the Casuists. In 1656 he had played with all his might his little part in the launching of the *Provinciales*.

Thus Rancé's vocation had long been gestating. Arnauld, that great connoisseur of fruit, had only to reach out his hand to pluck this ripe pear. Rancé for his part did not at first perhaps say no. Was it not the most simple and natural solution? Yet it seems that his inclinations this way could not have lasted long. D'Andilly—too sure of success, too persistent, above all so ill-advised as not to conceal the sugar-plum—must very soon have irritated him profoundly.

Already very fastidious in the matter of virtue, it is quite possible that he judged the ascetic rule of Port-Royal too soft and worldly. How far more austere was the rule he was so soon to draw up himself! Besides, in this Port-Royal, he would be but a new recruit, brilliant assuredly, caressed and made much of in consequence, but still bound to take a back seat.

In short, after having kept them and himself in suspense for some months—as we see by his letters to the elder Robert—he slipped through their hands. As a Christian, I am delighted—for we needed La Trappe, and none but Rancé would have given it to us: but as an amateur of comedy, I regret vastly that the plan came to nothing. Rancé at Port-Royal is a vision to touch the imagination with delirium. I would give him something less than two

months to turn the whole place upside down. This revolutionary on the grand scale would have begun by cutting down first Robert's pear-trees, then the authority of the elder Arnauld. Save possibly M. Hamon, our Messieurs would have fled as fast as their legs could carry them. So magnetic was his personality, so sublime his designs, that he would have dragged the majority of the nuns after him. They would have signed the anti-Jansenist declaration, chanting the psalms of the deliverance. The face of history would have been changed. Let Port-Royal take consolation. In any case they soon forgave him for his escape. When I failed in my first examination for the diploma my old professor of Rhetoric exclaimed: "As far as I'm concerned, you have passed." So with Rancé and Port-Royal. They always regarded him as of themselves, a Jansenist *in partibus infidelium*, one, moreover, who was of more use to them from outside. He bore their mark. La Trappe was but the realisation, the achievement, of their own ideal. A thousand underground passages bound the two hallowed solitudes. Each had its *enfant terrible*—Rancé and Racine—the first more *terrible* than the other. All of which appears in the sequel.

Other vistas opened before him—the foreign missions, or simply preaching and other priestly work in France. But all these things came into collision with his fixed idea, which was to break with the world. Chateaubriand has well said: His "memory of the world was a hatred of life, become in him a veritable obsession. His despair of humanity resembled the stoicism of the ancients, save that it had passed through Christianity." "I confess," he wrote, "that I no longer see a single man in the world with the least pleasure. I have now been speaking of

nought but detachment and retreat for six years and the first step has yet to be made. I wish to be so completely forgotten, that men will not even think that I have been."

Very sincere—when he judges himself like that—and even true. Such was the fundamental Rancé—and such the heroi-comedy of all his life of penitence. He aspires to solitude and silence—and he is incapable of bearing solitude and silence for long. Well—said his friends ironically: "What could be simpler? Others before you have fled from the world. For heaven's sake, be a monk." Later on he was to take up the challenge. But for the moment that challenge touched a living nerve to agony. At the thought of turning monk the respectable man in him and the court ecclesiastic had goose-flesh. The religious habit was an eyesore to that elegant society. Speaking of a friar preacher, the abbé de Villiers cried out:

> Pourquoi vient-il montrer son affreuse figure,
> Et nous assassinant d'un entretien flatteur,
> Des dames, sous un froc, brigue-t-il la faveur?

Odd as it seems to us, no sacrifice can have cost Rancé more than putting on the white habit; and then even if—with impulsive generosity and, I think, without great merit—he had reduced the splendour of his train, it would cost him something to renounce the minimum of comfort that he had left himself. Who can blame him? We remember the pathetic letter in which Bossuet pleads that he be left the solace of the superfluous. Rancé loved his rich library, his learned lounging among the Fathers and the Councils, perhaps also the shady groves of Véretz. "I live at home more or less alone," he wrote about this time. "I am seen but by few and all my energy is for books and for what I take to be of my profession. I find

enough inclination for it to make me believe that I should not weary of the life I live. . . ." Wherein he was mistaken, I fancy. Boredom would have come galloping back. For the moment this virtual *far niente* of prayer and study was very attractive: and it came into his mind to share this gentle retreat with a chosen friend. Le Roi, the abbé of Hautefontaine, let himself be tempted. But, after four months, ill-health obliged him to depart.

The frail abbé Testu took his place, a finely religious mind of the same cast. But after four months, hypochondria overcame him and he too disappeared. So you have two nervous break-downs in succession.

One would not have thought the climate of Touraine so upsetting: it may well be that Rancé helped the climate. He probably appointed himself prior and he would not have spared remonstrances. Unwittingly he was playing a prelude to the thunders which were later to shake the chapter-room at La Trappe. See how Providence disposes all things fitly. The supreme sacrifice, of which the hour was at hand, would have its mild compensations. In his desert, Rancé would find scope for his taste for domination. The air of La Trappe with its swamps is not as good as the air of Véretz: but his monks obeyed him: neither rheumatism nor pneumonia prevented that.

Yet he was progressing, faithful to the star which led him, though as yet he did not see it. As we shall see later in studying his reforming work, Rancé had a sort of flair for sanctity. During these long years of consultations and uncertainty, he did not know where he was going, but his deepest instincts saved him from wandering from the true path or turning back. By the early part of 1662, he had finished cutting, one by one, the thongs that held him. He

had resigned his benefices: he had given his two houses in Paris to the Hôtel-Dieu: and—far more significant and far more of a wrench—he had just sold his château of Véretz. At the end of July 1662, he was on the road towards his abbey of La Trappe, not doubting that that would be his last stage. He proposed to institute a reform, which he was enabled and indeed bound in conscience to do by his position as *abbé commendataire*—and indeed he was bound in conscience still closer because of his father's responsibility and his own for the frightful decadence into which forty years of neglect had allowed the abbey to sink. The buildings were in the last stages of ruin, and the monks had become wild men of the woods. They had abandoned " the psalter for the musket ", as the abbé Dubois pleasantly phrased it, and " they had fallen into a state akin to barbarism." These muskets could no longer distinguish between a roebuck and a peasant.

There was an uproar when Rancé, barely arrived, proposed their reform. They threatened to " knife him or throw him in their ponds." Had they been less stupid, they would soon have seen that their abbot was afraid of nothing. Besides he had, at need, the services of the King's dragoons and the Courts of law. All France was at one in wanting to be rid of this vermin. Yet let us give a farewell handclasp to these poor devils. I have often dreamed of telling their story. There were several hundred in the monastic world of that day, soon to vanish like the Red Indians, for reform was everywhere. At La Trappe they were but six. Do not take them for Thelemites. They scarcely hunted except that they might not die of hunger. This was simply the other extreme—yesterday it had been the scandal of luxury, to-day it was the scandal of barbarism. They had

simply exchanged shames, so to speak, these pitiful relics of a race once powerful, reduced to beggary by the Counter-Reformation.

Among them one might be sure of finding decent men, anxious enough to shake off their degradation, terrorised by the majority. One of the half-dozen at La Trappe was to equal Rancé's most saintly disciples in the fervour of his penitence. At any rate things settled down peaceably. On the 17th August 1662, the six monks agreed to yield their place to the Cistercians of the Strict Observance. They were given a reasonable provision and left free to remain within the abbey enclosure or to fare farther. A few days later a little band, sent out from the reformed Abbey of Perseigne, took possession of these dismal ruins. The whole thing took less than three weeks. I came, I spoke, I conquered. He beats the big drum a trifle hard, but he *does* get results.

For Rancé himself, nothing was yet decided, or rather nothing seemed decided. Between him and the world the bridges were not yet broken. He was *abbé commendataire* but he did not wear the habit. Yet La Trappe, which he had brought back to life and which he saw living before his eyes—his eager eyes—was gently working upon him, moving him more every day, gaining on him: very soon it conquered him. This duel is not the least beautiful of his life—compact of duels, but of another sort. Monk and yet not monk, and rather embarrassed at not being, he followed step by step the movements of the silent band who were helping the masons to rebuild the abbey. "He abstained with them in the refectory, was present at all the day and night offices." All these were new impressions for him, bracing and soothing at once. Why should he

not set up his abode in this solitude, as *abbé commendataire?* Such a compromise would meet the demands of his vanity and would yet allow him to make his own all that most appealed to him in the life of the monks. He sent for his library and his furniture, imagining that "having pushed self-spoliation as far as it could go, and having satisfied his conscience by the sale of his goods and the resignation of his benefices," nought remained to him save to pass his days in peace at La Trappe. *Hæc requies mea. . . .* In a man of such flooding activity that it often overflowed into mere agitation, these recurrent fits of craving for relaxation and repose are worth notice.

Not that he folded his arms in slumber. That was not his way. In addition to the organising work which had to be initiated by him and over which he was not the man to relax control, there were works of another sort in which from the very beginning he was passionately interested and which in the event showed him his vocation. The spiritual father of the little community was obliged to be absent; Rancé as temporal father took his place. What with direction, exhortations and, I fancy, reprimands, there was no difference between him and an abbot proper save the title and the habit. On the 17th April 1663, "as they were chanting the psalms of Sext, and he was asking God with more fervour that, if it were His will that he should become a monk, He should take from him the repugnance and the opposition he felt towards this state, . . . there resounded in his ears like thunder these words of Psalm 124 which his monks were singing: *Qui confidunt in Domino sicut mons Sion: non commovebitur in æternum.* He was struck by them, overwhelmed."

From that moment his decision was made. Ah! the

Lord of hearts and imaginations knows how to take us. A mountain! its granite peak flinging calm defiance at the mockeries and coward compromises of the world as at our own weaknesses! Never doubt it: that last stage of hesitation had been dictated by human respect. "The habit I wear," he wrote later, "makes me contemptible in the eyes of the greater part of men, and it is this contempt, which I have merited, that will, I hope, restore to me my original innocence." He was recoiling at once from two things: from the jests which would welcome his change of state, and from the jests which would break out again worse than ever when, after a few months in the clouds, a new wave of boredom should bring him back to the world. For almost all those who knew him, even his spiritual directors, were, I dare affirm, convinced that he would not stick to it. So you have him, childish and heroic. As small as we in his absurd fears—how much greater in his daring to spurn them. *Qui confidit in Domino, tamquam mons Sion.*

That he might rule his abbey as its real abbot, he had to have permission of the King. You think he had only to ask? You are wrong. The Council, which had not an affair like this to discuss every day, looked askance. "His Majesty's rights are involved," they said: "if all the *abbés commendataires* chose to do likewise, the King would be deprived of a thousand means of recognising the services of his most devoted subjects." Anne of Austria intervened in his favour and the obstacle was removed. On the 30th May 1663, in the evening the abbé de Rancé "had the great bell of the monastery rung to summon the monks to chapter. Seeing them all about him, he rose . . . and with profound emotion he declared to them, what as yet they

did not know, that he wished to spend the rest of his days with them, in the same habit and under the same rule; that meanwhile, he was going to begin his probation at the Abbey of Perseigne, the novitiate of the Province."

From this first hour of his abbatial career, he is magnificent at the head of his regiment. The monks wept with joy: and with no merely formal tears. From the first day to the last, they were passionately devoted to him, practically adored him, forgave him everything—or rather, did not even know they had anything to forgive.

Till then he had kept with him his valet, Antoine, before whom he trembled a little, as later and more ignominiously he trembled before M. Maine. This Antoine looked like one of Regnard's flunkeys embarked on Sancho Panza's adventures: tougher than the abbés Le Roi and Testu he had quitted the climate of Véretz without enthusiasm. To say good-bye to that princely residence! and to go where, just heaven! Monk at La Trappe in his own despite, he hoped each morning that one more of his master's "flights" would take them back at last to a normal life, a life more worthy of both. But soon he was at the end of his patience: a helpless witness of so many follies, he no longer contained his wrath. He cursed the band of monks, who could only listen.—"The good sisters thought he was speaking Greek!" —He did not spare scenes even with his master. "Have you then sworn, Monsieur, to establish us in misery?"

The "us" scandalised the abbé Dubois. He fancied that the will which Rancé had just made in favour of La Trappe was the last straw for Antoine. But no! his fury was noble, disinterested: the fury of love. He also—Antoine—was of the world: "frocards" filled him with disgust. What cut him to the heart most was the decadence into which

the abbé was not so much falling as hurling himself. Antoine would have his part, was already having his part, in the great humiliation. What was money to him? He was young and well set-up: he had good connections. A man who has spent long years in the service of a Bouthillier—and such a Bouthillier—has no difficulty in finding a post. But a man does not meet such a master every day! Antoine identified himself with Rancé completely. He could not bear to live away from him, where he could no more see him, hear him, serve him, be rude to him. The habit, poverty—these are a small thing, in the company of Rancé habited and poor. For all this world's gold, he would not let him go forward alone. Abbé Dubois calls it a miracle: I do not. Side by side, Antoine and Rancé took the monastic habit at the novitiate of Perseigne, 13th June 1663.

Yet it *is* a miracle of divine grace—*ecce nova facio omnia* —but still more a miracle of Rancé's personality: and one which gives endless food for thought to the biographer of this astonishing man—disconcerting, contradictory, at once attractive and repellent.

Would Antoine read what I write without astonishment and—allowing for his present state—without sadness? In this or that page would he not refuse to recognise his master? Can I afford to ignore his opposition? Between him and me, who is to judge? There are of course in that life many things—gestures, words, writings—which I am better able than Antoine to know of and to estimate. But what man ever translated his whole self into gestures, words, writings? Behind the surface self is another as real, which yet, in the nature of the case, eludes the most ruthless curiosity, the most searching analysis. It has no outward

showing save in a certain very mysterious fascination. It is to the existence in Rancé of this hidden self that the impassioned devotion of Antoine bears witness. We know too that many others—two or three generations of Trappists—were, like him, fascinated and held subject. And never forget, for it is a capital point in him, that Rancé, though in the last analysis a good man, was of those—very numerous—too numerous—who are loved more than they will ever love. But could men love them as they do, if in the last recesses of their being, there were not hidden some mysterious thing more loving than love, more virtuous than virtue?

## Chapter III

# THE ASSAULT ON THE NON-REFORMED CISTERCIANS

*Plus quam civilia bella*. . . . War was raging at that time, and for forty years before, between the two French branches of the Cistercian Order. On one side the "Reformed", the Strict Observance (which Rancé had just established at La Trappe): on the other side the Common Observance, the more numerous of the two. Little by little the Strict Observance, inaugurated with many difficulties in the first years of the seventeenth century, had gained ground. By about 1660, of several hundreds of abbeys, some sixty undertook "to observe the rule of St Benedict and the constitutions of Cîteaux in all their purity and perfection, renouncing every sort of dispensation and privilege." They did not form an independent congregation like the Feuillants, Saint-Vanne or Saint-Maur. They remained under the jurisdiction of their old order. The special Vicar who was in direct control of them held his authority from the Chapter-General of Cîteaux. The rupture between these vigorously hostile brethren was not official. In certain houses of study Common Observance and Reformed lived a kind of cat and dog life side by side, each party faithful, strictly and aggressively faithful, to its own Observance. "A fatal mingling of feast and fast," writes our friend Gervaise, who was, as became a disciple of Rancé, a rigid last-ditch partisan of the Reform. "Beside the

inevitable inconvenience of two different sets of meals, no one knew where to place these meat-eaters. It was proposed to make two refectories "—which would at any rate have been better than two chapels.

Such was the usual tone—and often enough the puerility—of these quarrels. I borrow this description from a very curious book, the *Histoire Générale de la Réforme de Cîteaux en France*, which Gervaise, exiled from La Trappe, wrote in his last days (1746). It is a virulent pamphlet against the Non-Reformed, who, however, were sufficiently influential to have it suppressed, so that a copy is not easily to be found to-day.

At the moment when our story meets them, the Reformed did not show much more politeness. In one of their numerous cases against the Abbot of Cîteaux, Dom Vaussin, they undertook to produce a thousand witnesses who would depose that the Non-Reformed " do not commonly observe any of the fasts prescribed by the rule . . . that they all wear linen shirts like seculars; that they sleep undressed, in a shirt, between two sheets, on mattresses and feather-beds; that they do not rise till five; that they never do any work with their hands; that they observe no silence, night or day; that they are given neither to prayer nor to spiritual reading; that outside the hours of Office, they usually have no other exercise than chattering in a kitchen with footmen and servant girls or strolling in the fields, woods and villages . . .; that all, or the greater part, have money . . .; that their monks, priors, and others, are commonly given to the chase and to gaming, and that what St Paul calls *commessationes compotationes* are matters of every day. . . . The abbots pride themselves upon having fine carriages with six horses, tables most deliciously

served, good beds of down, precious furnishing, silver plate, sworded and gold-befrogged valets. . . . They let their monasteries sink . . . into awful irregularities."

That, you think, is a painful sight and our Moderates in a sad pass. Do not be deceived. Documents of this kind—and God knows we have piles of them—do not weigh one straw in the scales of history. Insinuations prove nothing; nor do loud words—such as "awful irregularities". This or that disorder, proven against this or that abbey and darkened in the telling, does not affect the honour of the whole Order. It is a poor document, truly, proving only that a passion for victory sometimes degrades the defenders of the holiest causes, and beyond that, teaching us nothing save what we had no need to be taught; to wit that the Non-Reformed proposed to maintain their dispensations and their traditional privileges: or, in other words, that the Non-Reformed were not the Reformed. It is a long way from that to the deplorable abuses which we remember as marking the death agony of the old order at La Trappe. Swept along by the great wave of renewal which was then clearing the whole kingdom—affected too by the example of its Reformed—the Cistercian Order had gradually risen, not to a heroic but certainly to a respectable level. What was incapable of new birth had been allowed to die; thus cauterised, the body as a whole, even where it was most hostile to the Reformed, had set itself to the most pressing reform of all—a return to the essentials of the religious life.

Non-Reformed was not—or at any rate was not now—a synonym for "scandalous", as so many of the Reformed, with Rancé at their head, would not have been sorry to persuade the world. The opposition lay not between good

and bad but between good and better: between a pedestrian fidelity to absolute essentials and the generous enthusiasm which dreams only of sacrifice. This view I base on the word of a learned Trappist of our own day, as " Reformed " as it is possible to be, Père Canivet, author of a fine book *L'Ordre de Cîteaux en Belgique*. " Let us not," he writes, " imagine floods of abomination when we come to speak of Reform. This word has a false sound in certain ears "—almost in all ears! " It seems to evoke . . . the idea of a desperate situation, full of crying abuses, of complete ignoring of the essential duties of the religious life." On the contrary, it happened very often, particularly among our seventeenth-century Non-Reformed that the " Christian life and the religious life remained intact in their essential elements; the difference was only one of the degree of intensity in the struggle against the tendencies of man's sensual nature. The great fault was to have allowed a little comfort in a life which should have been fixed in an unceasing holocaust."

That is a true analysis, and between these two conceptions of the Cistercian life it goes without saying that the Trappist we are quoting does not hesitate. He has made his choice. He feels better than we the absurdity of the phrase " a comfortable Clairvaux." But equally he does not allow comfort to be read as licence nor a state of things to be declared intolerable which the Church has not condemned. In the dispute we are about to relate, the Pope decided for the Common Observance.

After all, they had the law on their side. Agelong prescription supported them. When a young man of that time, resolved for good motive to quit the world, knocked at the door of an abbey, it was not St Bernard who met

him, rule in hand; yet neither was it Antichrist—even if the abbot had gold-befrogged lackeys and a fine carriage, even if the Observance which it was his to maintain was less rigid than of old. Nothing was said to the candidate of abstaining from meat every day, nor of digging the earth, nor of observing perpetual silence.

In addition to chastity, whose demands never change, he would practise, according to the usage of his abbey, the virtues to which his vows would bind him—obedience, poverty, stability. That he would promise and nothing else. Yet that was no small matter. Let him keep to that, and none could bind him in conscience to austerities not contemplated in the original contract. He was free to renounce, on his own personal account, the advantages of a mitigation which was unheroic, yet not sinful: he was free, that is, to reform himself. But to get others to embrace this same reform, he must use no arms save persuasion and example.

So it was understood by the great originator of the Cistercian Strict Observance, Dom Largentier, Abbot of Clairvaux. As he knelt before the tomb of St Bernard, the contrast between the Clairvaux of the twelfth century and the Clairvaux of the newly born seventeenth moved him fiercely and drew from him the cry that was to become famous: "*O abbas et abbas!*" And forthwith, continues Dom Canivet, "without asking any of his monks to follow him in the way of sacrifice . . . he began to purge away all, in his person and his way of life, that St Bernard would have condemned. To compensate, he added all the monastic virtues and observances of the older Clairvaux. . . . Three months later he saw himself followed by all his monks . . . treading hard on his

heels in the rude upward climb back to the ancient observances."

But unfortunately Largentier died too soon (1624). "His calm, deliberate mind, his power of persuasion with its deepest source in his own example, would have been of immense value to the leaders of the Reform." Under these men, the Strict Observance changed its tactics. "It tended to aggressiveness: it wished to dominate, to gain the upper hand as it were by direct assault, or if it could not succeed in that, then to withdraw from the direction of the superiors (the Abbot of Cîteaux and the General Chapter). It was this unruly tendency which from the beginning hindered its progress and which, as it continued to grow—aided and abetted by M. de Rancé with all his might—aroused against it so much ill-feeling and so lively an opposition on the part of the Common Observance."

There again the analysis seems to me profoundly true and of capital importance: but you will find nothing of it in the various lives of Rancé.

"For more than forty years, the two Cistercian Observances showed the sad spectacle of divisions widened unceasingly by writings, often enough virulent, hurled from each camp at the other; and at bottom, the precise point at issue, the observance on trial, the pivot of these interminable discussions, is simply and solely the abstinence from meat."

The General of Cîteaux was at that time a deserter from the Reform, Dom Vaussin. To bring the quarrel to an end, he had hit on a compromise, on which, soon after, Pope Alexander VII was likewise to hit: the Non-Reformed were to abandon some of their privileges and the Reformed some of their claims: after which, complete uniformity

would reign not only in the French abbeys, but throughout the Order. What he proposed was a semi-Reform which should have the great advantage of reaching the Cistercians of the other Catholic countries, who were for the most part less austere than the Common Observance of France. Informed of this plan, which could hardly fail to commend itself to the Roman Court, the Pope summoned the matter to his tribunal. The discussion lasted two years, 1664-66. Dom Vaussin upheld his plan in person. The Abbot of Val-Richer and the Abbot of La Trappe contended for the Strict Observance. It may at first sight seem strange that the Reformed should have charged Rancé, a new-comer in their fold, with so delicate a mission. But they took into consideration "his piety, his zeal, his intellect and his eloquence, above all his experience of the world." Besides —the embassy would cost money, and when a Rancé needs money he gets it. One other condition was necessary to the making of that choice—a complete ignorance both of Rome and of Rancé.

Fortunately he was not to go alone. His co-delegate, Dominique George, Abbot of Val-Richer, lacked none of the necessary qualities—good sense, self-control, discretion and—what even in Rome was no drawback—true holiness. Before entering the Cistercian Order, he had created ecclesiastical retreats and in that alone he had done more than any man save Bourdoise for the renewal of the secular clergy. It will be a pleasing sight to see our oddly matched couple in action: the breeze and the whirlwind.

Vaussin travelled like a prince. According to the pamphlets of the other side, before leaving Cîteaux "he had secured a powerful supporter in the person of the Cardinal-Nephew . . . (Chigi), who governed everything in the

name of his uncle Alexander VII, who was now very infirm "—the Pope, you understand, is always very infirm when he condemns us.—" The young Cardinal loved pomp. . . . He found his man in the Abbot of Cîteaux. When (Chigi) came to France to ask pardon of the King for the insult that had been given to the duc de Créqui, the Abbot presented him with a team of six carriage horses, like to those which drew the King's carriage."

Without descending so low, Rancé, on his side, had furnished himself with powerful recommendations, letters from the Queen-Mother, from the Duchesse d'Orléans. . . . " For though the saints have more confidence in the protection of God than in the help of men, yet they do not neglect, in affairs of moment . . . to make use of any profit they can draw from creatures."

In this spirit, he had gone to see Retz at Commercy to take his advice on the manner in which he should bear himself at that Court, which is not conducted as others are.

On the 16th of November 1664, he at last arrived in the capital of that strange country. He had there a protector and adviser, Père Bona, General of the Feuillants, the strict order of St Bernard—and as such won in advance to the cause of the Reform—now Cardinal, high in favour with Alexander VII. At their very first meeting, Bona warned him that Rome was already solidly set against the French Reform, that the chancellor Séguier was openly supporting the Abbot of Cîteaux, that it had been given out that no one but the Queen-Mother protected it (which was true), that after her death, which could not be far off, the King and his Council would destroy it, that the other nations would have none of it. . . .

" ' What, father,' cried the Abbot of La Trappe, with his

usual fire: 'you think it possible that the Court of Rome could bring itself to destroy an observance, established by the authority of the Pope in over seventy monasteries, which is a source of edification to the whole Kingdom? Where then must piety, must virtue, must penitence find refuge? . . . Ah! how different the Rome of to-day from the Rome of St Bernard's time!'

"'Softly, my dear abbot,' said Père Bona, seizing his hands, 'we do not speak so loud in this country.'"

He was already worked up. The cardinals and prelates soon completed his exasperation. He was received with all the cordiality in the world, but they did not leave him the shadow of an illusion. "Some told him that God asked only the heart and did not require of us the destruction of our body by excessive penances. Others assured him that the eating of meat did not matter either way: others again preached to him nothing save submission to the Holy See, which they ranked equal with the most heroic virtues of Christianity."

The Pope received the pair of them kindly. He told them that he followed with joy the progress of their Reform, and was ever praying for the day when the whole Cistercian Order should return to the primitive Observance.—Eh! who could doubt it!—But that day was still far off. Soon after, Bona informed them that a Brief was in preparation "fulminating against the Reform." He would try to soften it down as much as possible but could guarantee nothing. Whereupon Rancé, instead of trusting to the devotion and the influence of his friend, demanded a new audience. It was refused. Then, humiliated, at the end of his nervous strength, he lost his head and abandoned both his post and his party. "Without taking leave of any but his most

intimate friends," he fled on the 4th February 1665. In less than two months Rome had proved too much for this pilgrim of Reform. The pilgrims of Freedom—Lamennais, Lacordaire and Montalembert—more harshly treated, were more patient than he.

Not that I am shocked by his flight. Heaven forbid. There is in it a mixture of weakness and impertinence which I find rather charming. And what a blaze of light for us, whose sole object is to know him. I have already spoken of his characteristic " flights ". This one was not the last of them, nor the most wrong-headed. But it has this advantage, that it shows itself, so to say, in the pure state. It is sheer flight, flight unalloyed. Rancé might try to dress it up, to deck it in holy colours, but—the eulogists apart—he convinced no one. He wrote, for instance, to the Vicar-General of the Reform that " his sins were an obstacle to the mission wherewith he was charged." His sins were beside the point: his duty was to confess them, make firm purpose of amendment, and get on with his job. The whole letter is so curious that I must quote it:

" My sins are an insurmountable obstacle to the success of the Reform. It will never succeed while affairs are in such bad hands as mine. Here is need of men who can bend and transform themselves in a thousand ways, to suit the taste of the persons on whom we depend. Truth is hateful to them, yet thus far I have not been able to prevail upon myself to dissemble. The mere words *reform* and *penitence* terrify them. The heretics, they say, talk of nought else. What is to be done when one has to treat of the Reform of a whole great order with men of this character! You see then, Reverend Father, that I am no way fitted for this negotiation."

This penitential beating of one's neighbour's breast is one of the regular resorts of the Pharisee. Stricken with a kind of spiritual squint, he sees his own sins with his left eye, the sins of others with his right. Why must I be always having to reiterate—almost on every page—that Rancé was *not* a Pharisee?

He makes the same plea to Mère Louise: "I did it neither from caprice nor from passion; it was not my own idea. I yielded to the opinion of the most clear-sighted persons." Here he is either deceiving or being deceived. The man was so imperious, even in retreat, that probably no one tried to dissuade him. What would have been the use? They simply let him go. But assuredly the idea was entirely his own. All this talk is a plea in defence, for "his departure was no sooner made known at Rome and in France, than every spiteful tongue took arms against him. Never was seen a more terrible or more universal outburst. The Italians saw in Rancé's act a fine example of the *furia francese;* others said that disappointment and despair had led him to take this step; the more moderate argued that the man was not suited for the discussion of affairs, that he was too rigid and too much in love with his own opinion, that trying to push things to extremes achieves nothing. . . . He was spared scarcely more in France . . .; they could not understand how so able a man came to commit such a blunder."

At Lyons, a letter awaited him from the Vicar-General, ordering him to retrace his steps. "I started back immediately with all possible diligence," he wrote to Mère Louise, "and I may tell you that I had the satisfaction of finding in all the cardinals and other prelates with whom we are obliged to treat of our affairs, a demonstration of

real joy at my return." And as though to meet the gently malicious comments which he foresaw that his letter would call forth, he continues: "No! I am wiser than you think . . . I feel guilty of no yielding to passion in all the conduct of this affair, and I think I have not said a single word . . . which was not becoming in a person of my profession. I have spoken firmly on occasion, and in similar need I shall never fail to do so." Oh! on that at least we have no anxiety. Otherwise I do not think that he departs more than two or three times from that exquisite politeness which was one of his most captivating gifts. It was rather interior firmness that he lacked, calm self-possession and a certain humility. "Passion," no; but, to use a Latin word, "impotentia"; that word says everything.

Himself apart, however, he scolded everybody right and left. Very decidedly he found Rome "insupportable, seeing there so little zeal for penitence and for the practice of the highest Christian virtues." All the letters he wrote to his friends in France are full of these sentiments. "I remain as ill-suited to Rome as on the first day I arrived—that is to say, I find no more pleasure there."

If ever they canonise him, I recommend this admirable text to the decorators of St Peter's: "Rome is as unbearable to me as the world has been since my retirement, and but for the consolation I find in visiting the holy places, I should believe that there was no state comparable to mine." In France, heaven knows, it would have taken him many candles to discover the shadow of a saint; but in Rome—not the shadow of a shadow.

It came into his mind one day to make a retreat in one of the apparently less dissipated monasteries of this city of perdition. "As he entered," relates Dubois, who seems

to find the relation not in the least painful, " as he entered, for all the doors were open, which was in itself a flagrant irregularity, he saw five or six monks walking about . . . gesticulating and conversing together as if they had been in a public square——" The wretches! " His grace and modest air immediately caused him to be known for what he was." *Incessu patuit.* " Then the oldest of them . . . came to him and asked very politely what he wished." The abbé replied that he wished " to remain some days in the monastery with the monks, for edification and for a more worthy spending of the feast-days." Edification—and in such company—come now! " The worthy old man . . . replied to him with much ingenuity " and some little malice perhaps " that he was paying them a great honour, but that it was doubtful if he would find among them what he sought, for ' you Reformed,' he added ' take scandal at everything, and nothings seem to you monsters.' " He admitted that " among them a certain amount of conversation was allowed during meals, and after meals a few moments of recreation." Whereupon Rancé made him a dignified salutation in the French mode and without more words, turned away.

But what was his emotion when—ever on the watch—he discovered that this spiritual malaria had not spared even his fellow-ambassador. " One day he was informed that the abbot of Val-Richer had been invited to a concert at the home of a Roman prelate and that he had gone there; at this news, his soul was stirred to indignation, flamed within him; he left his house and rushed to his colleague. Without asking any explanation, he told him sharply, that he had been unable to feel other than the deepest grief at learning of his conduct, that in the sad state of their business,

it was for them to weep rather than rejoice. . . . The abbot of Val-Richer, after having received the avalanche on his head,"—the phrase is Dubois's, a trifle skittish for once: still we may pardon him: he soon got over this burst of levity—" the abbot of Val-Richer, then, maintained silence, as though another's conduct were in question. The abbé de Rancé, somewhat disconcerted and therefore speaking even more vehemently, asked him what persons had been present at the concert. The other replied calmly that he knew nothing about it: the fact was that he had received an invitation, that for politeness' sake he had not refused point-blank, but that he had of course not gone. Rancé admitted that he had been misinformed: then made the most humble, most courteous excuses. . . . The scene ended in a most edifying contest wherein, *neither having done wrong*, yet each strove to abase himself the more."

" Neither having done wrong " is worth a lengthy poem. In his *Vie de M. l'abbé du Val-Richer*, the Jesuit Père Buffier relates the same incident, but with a highly meritorious delicacy forbears to mention Rancé. He speaks of " an abbot of the Reform "—and concludes neatly: " Then on both sides excuses were offered, and those offered to the less passionate of the two were assuredly the more called for."

At Rome, from June 1665, Cardinal de Retz, ever zealous for the Reform, yet charged by the Vicar-General, the Abbot of Prières, to moderate the penances (perhaps also to moderate the tempestuous activities) of Rancé—had offered him a lodging in his own palace. He was gently preparing his friend for the shock of the adverse decision that was already certain. By now they had nothing on their side save the anxious advocacy of Anne of Austria, piously faithful, in her slow agony, to the reforming policy of

Louis XIII. In January of 1666 her death removed their one remaining trump. From that time it was certain that Alexander VII would not long delay the fateful decision. During those long months Rancé, with nothing to do save wait for the blow to fall, was a painful sight. Never perhaps had he known such suffering. At Véretz, after the death of Mme de Montbazon, the world alone fell in ruins about him. Here the feeling of his own helplessness while the Cistercian Order was sinking to ruin was not only a frightful wound to his vanity (bad enough at any time, and now roused to fever-point by the struggle) but a still more painful disappointment to the nobler part of him. Lamennais again! Weary of tossing on his grill, he relieved his tortured nerves and diverted his imagination with a scheme for a new "flight", more sensational than the last and more vengeful. He took, says Gervaise, "a resolution to pass the rest of his days in the terrible solitude of the Grande-Chartreuse, to live as a simple monk in an Order wherein relaxation had made no considerable inroads, that he might weep for the decadence and the destruction of the Order in which he now was. He applied to His Holiness for permission, and by de Retz's influence obtained it—but on the one condition that he should not use it till he had tried whether it was not still possible to live on quietly in his abbey of La Trappe, far from the outrageous conduct of the superiors of the Common Observance. This the Cardinal made him promise." Once again how little Rancé knew himself! A Carthusian—with nothing to interfere with save the handful of plants in his little garden plot! He would not have lasted a week.

In any case the worst of his panic was groundless. The Pope might well intend to give the Reform a lesson in

humility, to insist on a more respectful submission to the superiors of the Order and on the sacrifice of this or that observance: but he had no intention of destroying such a work. Besides, Cardinal Bona was there and behind him, calm but very active, the Abbot of Val-Richer, who without fuss but not without success, strove to have the most necessary amendments inserted in the Brief.

Before leaving Rome, the two ambassadors were granted an audience with the Pope—the second since their arrival—but on the express condition that no word should be said of the one thing that interested them. I imagine that both sides felt a certain emotion. Still there was no lack of topics. With truly Roman tact the aged Pope spoke to each of the two vanquished in turn on the subject most calculated to please him.

The Abbot of Val-Richer he closely questioned on the great work of his youth, retreats for the clergy. And M. de Rancé? Ah! "He spoke with him confidentially of the good and the evil he had observed in Rome, and asked his advice for the increase of the one and the destruction of the other." The good and the evil, most Holy Father? You may count upon it—the first was soon told. But admit that it was deliciously comic—almost too comic. Maupeou alone has recorded this priceless detail: if it was his own invention, then he was a eulogist who did not know his business.

The Cardinal-Nephew, Chigi, being also the Cardinal-Patron of Cîteaux, had to be visited. "In the presence of this prelate who was reputed to be most hostile to the Reform . . . Rancé betrayed his disappointment, in spite of himself, by certain vehement complaints. The Cardinal, obviously offended, rose from his seat and charged him with want of respect. The abbé de Rancé, quite unem-

barrassed, answered firmly: 'I speak as St Bernard spoke to the Popes.' "

There you are—so to speak.

The Cardinal calmed down at once. He appears to have said next day: "I cannot but admire the presence of mind of this abbot of La Trappe and his inimitable gift of speaking the truth." So be it: after all we do not know the exact meaning in Italian—or diplomacy—of "presence of mind." But let it stand: we shall have opportunities enough of surprising our abbot in a state of ebullition. For the moment let us be content to savour with him the delights of that solitude to which he had aspired these two weary years. At the end of one of his chapters on the Roman affair, the abbé Dubois cries out sublimely but a little wildly: "Thus in all lands, under the most different skies, the abbé de Rancé, misunderstood and weary, dreamed but of two things—a desert and a tomb."

On 10th March 1666, Rancé was back again at La Trappe —only, alas, to leave it again almost at once.

The Brief of Alexander VII was at last promulgated and a question arose whether the Reformed should be present at the Chapter-General of Cîteaux, which had just been convoked (1667), and at which the victory of the Common Observance would be registered? Most of the abbots were for abstention. "What shall we do there?" said they—it is Gervaise who draws up their argument, as it might be Livy—"but be the witnesses of our own defeat and lend the authority of our presence to whatever they may do against the Reform? We shall be overwhelmed by weight of numbers. The Abbot of Cîteaux will make himself Master of the Chapter. He has the means in his hands and he knows them: by giving lavish hospitality to

all these abbots of Germany, Switzerland, Poland and other foreign countries, and by pouring out for them in profusion the excellent wine of his Clos de Vougeot—which on like occasions have already worked so many miracles—he will get them to do whatever he pleases."

With the support of Lamoignon, Rancé won them to the opposite, and much wiser, decision. The absent are always wrong, he said: "My opinion is that they will never dare to do in our presence what they will certainly attempt if no one of us is there to maintain our cause." *Si forte virum quem. . . .* He would be that man.

"It was long since a more crowded Chapter-General had been seen at Cîteaux. There were abbots from every nation in Europe"—a moving sight, if you remember that the question at stake was nothing less than a choice between St Bernard and the Pope. By accepting the Brief the majority would be in revolt—and so, in fact, they *were* to be—at least against the letter of their great founder; by refusing to accept the Brief, the minority would be in revolt—and so, alas, *they* were to be—against the living Head of the Church.

"The abbot of Cîteaux descended from his throne and falling on his knees, embraced the Brief, kissed it and declared that he would use all his authority to put it into execution."

And now for Rancé, self-appointed leader of the opposition. With controlled and most impressive force, he declared the Brief not exactly null but, what comes to the same thing in practice, unacceptable. He had followed the treacherous development of this unhappy document on the spot, in Rome itself. There were ambiguous clauses in it—intentionally equivocal—opposed to the holy rule and to

the ancient statutes of Cîteaux. The Pope was an old man and a sick man and could have but a very slender knowledge of the document he had been made to sign. Yet he submitted, out of respect for the Holy See and the royal authority—for Louis XIV had given his visa to the Brief—but only until such a time as, under the King's good pleasure, they might obtain liberty to appeal to the court of Rome.

"While the abbot of La Trappe was speaking so firmly, the abbot of Cîteaux was quivering and on the point . . . of closing Rancé's mouth—we are told that all present saw that he was trembling. He was held in check by the profound silence which reigned among the Chapter—marking the satisfaction they felt in the speech of so able a man—for no one spoke Latin better than Rancé. But when he had finished, he thought best, by way of intimidating the others, to take a high line . . . he told Rancé, in a tone which showed alike indignation and wrath, that he was surprised beyond measure to see a man so young and so new in the Order speaking so freely."

"A young monk, truly," replied Rancé, "but a doctor of the Sorbonne old enough to have the right to say his mind."

And he renewed his protestations against the reception of the Brief, and with him the fifteen abbots of the Reform present that day.

A few months later, Alexander's successor, Clement IX, answered them roundly and almost point by point in the Bull wherein he confirmed the decisions of the Chapter-General. "As to the protestations made in the said chapter by the abbot of La Trappe and his adherents, and their demand for a new appeal to the Holy See against the letters of our predecessor Alexander VII, on the pretext that

several obscure and ambiguous matters have been introduced into them . . . against the intentions of that Pontiff, to whom almost nothing of this affair had been communicated on account of his ill-health, we reject them . . . and the last we declare temerarious."

The lesson was hard, but necessary. Their fasts did not dispense the Reformed from obeying the Church. As for the reasons imagined by Rancé for quashing the Pope's decision, it is obvious that were they valid in this particular case, they would be equally valid in all cases whatsoever. If a man wished to refuse obedience to a decree of Rome, he could always urge that the Pope had gout when he was given the document to sign, or that he was in his dotage, or that he had yielded to some pressure from someone or other, or that the adverse party had bought his nephew. Honest rebellion would be a better thing. Personally I do not consider myself a very wild ultramontane, and I know that it is not always easy to see the justice of a disciplinary measure like this, where infallibility is not in question. Yet every Catholic—even a Reformed—must give respectful obedience; while great souls do better still and try to persuade themselves that the blow has fallen upon them justly. So it was to be, long after, with the youthful democrats of *Le Sillon*, by comparison with whom it must be admitted that Rancé here cuts a very poor figure. For really the two dramas were very much the same. Rancé invoked the primitive rule of St Bernard, and *Le Sillon* would have no other philosophy of society than they believed they had found in the Gospel.

I understand Rancé's astonishment, indignation and distress easily enough: that the Vicar of Jesus Christ should encourage the Non-Reformed and humiliate the Reformed

does seem, at first sight, more than strange. Yet if I had to defend Alexander's decree, I think I could do it with no great trouble.

The Pope raised himself far above the particular quarrel which divided the French Cistercians. He took advantage of the dispute that had been brought before him to give a canonical status to the whole Cistercian Order. Any attempt to bring them all back, by a sort of *coup d'état*, to the primitive observance would have been sheer folly: revolutions of that sort are not the work of a day: the better would certainly be the enemy of the good. So he fixed for all a standard midway between extreme rigour and extreme laxity. He admired the Reformed and did not call upon them to give up any single observance. But he *did* wish to put an end to the ill-conceived and ill-conducted agitation into which their zeal had driven them. Hence he inserted certain provisions restraining the powers of the Vicars of the Reform and binding the two branches in closer union. It is difficult to say that his line of reasoning was wrong: certainly it was in the normal tradition of the Papacy: God keep it from extremists!

In the small world of La Trappe, Rancé was the man to do marvels: as Superior-General of the Cistercians—not to say as Sovereign-Pontiff—he would have been a calamity. And the event seems to have justified Alexander's action. We must not be deafened by the lamentations uttered by the abbé Dubois, in his anxiety to make us forget the more than Gallican outbursts of his hero. " The Non-Reformed," he cries, " who had moved the earth and all its powers to extort (this Brief) from the Holy See "—what! you say—had not Rancé arrived in Rome and Retz after him, their napkins crammed full of influential recommendations?—

" paid no regard to it and treated it as a dead letter. Of the fifty articles which went to make it, they had retained for their observance but one—that which allowed them to eat meat. The old Cîteaux . . . was sunk in flesh and blood."

Rancé could not have put it better. I, alas, am too ignorant to give either of them the lie: I can only quote a great scholar, who is, moreover, a Trappist. " Alexander VII," writes Dom Canivet, " wished to close the breach by his Brief *In Suprema* of 1666; a slightly mitigated observance was imposed on the whole order. *Peace, regularity, fervour flourished from that time in the abbeys.*"

We are told that Rancé was not long in admitting his fault and that the authority of the Holy See had no more unyielding champion than he was to become. " He protested *an instant* against the Brief and soon submitted." Really? The abbé Dubois's " instant " lasted years. The appeal framed by Rancé and the Reformed at the Chapter-General of 1667 had been laid before the King. " But the court, wearied out . . . by these interminable disputes, did not feel called upon to attend to them, and on 27th March 1673 "—six years later—" there came a decree of the Grand Council, referring the parties to the Holy See, for the reason that it was for the Pope who had given the Brief to give the explanation."

To us that looks like common sense; to Rancé it was the final abomination. If it has now to hope for salvation from Rome alone, the Order is lost. " All that he said, all that he wrote from that time breathes profound sadness." The most heart-rending prophecies of Israel " are not perhaps more sad and mournful than the groanings of abbot de Rancé weeping over Cîteaux." At any rate they

dismayed Sainte-Beuve! Read him: From the letters written by Rancé at this dark time "one historic thought most clearly emerges—that the day of monks is over. . . . The world wants them no more, understands and can bear with them no more. That is true on Rancé's own admission. In many places he returns to this despairing idea. His judgment on his order is decisive: 'Its very ruins,' he cries, 'are irreparable.' So the *grand siècle*—which we imagine to ourselves as fervent, was done with monks, and that on the admission of the holiest and purest of the monastic reformers of the time. We see in the whole course of this correspondence how far Rancé saw that holiness was a rock of offence."

So writes a historian who would, presumably, judge contemporary Catholicism according to the diatribes of Léon Bloy: as though the *grand siècle* knew no monks but Cistercians, and no saints but Rancé: or rather, to keep to the Cistercian alone, as though there were no appeal from the judgment of a Rancé. Why, La Trappe is of itself enough to prove that France was not "done with monks." But here the Comic Muse intervenes with a little cold water for our indignation!

The Strict Observance had entrusted the care of its interests in Rome to the pious and learned Claude Le Maître, Abbot of Châtillon: naturally Rancé soon began to tremble for the virtue of this wretched man, thus exiled and for so long, "in a place where is found in abundance and even in the most innocent guise—all that is able to content and to satisfy." As I have said, Rome is for him a place accursed, the modern Babylon. And himself—Rancé? Is he so sure that he escaped all touch of contagion while he was there? "By the mercy of God," he continues,

"I did not commit great sins when I was sent to Rome, yet I protest that, had I had the health, I should have made a second voyage to make reparation for the faults of the first."—"A second voyage"—rash man!—"God will call you to account for the least of your acts; there are none that may not be of avail to a man of our profession, above all at this moment, when our tears should be our only food." *Sibi constat*—he is all of a piece. This is the same man who a while ago was abusing the Abbot of Val-Richer. What a pity the word "humbug" is not French.

There was, of course, a more certain means of saving the virtue of the Abbot of Châtillon. After all why should he embark on a voyage so perilous? Have we not here at home, in this pious city of Paris, a judge of far other illuminations than come to the Holy See, far less accessible to the flattery—and trickery—of the Common Observance? Let the King judge our appeal by writ of error: that is, let him quash the Brief of Pope Alexander. It was, then, decided "that reference should be made to the King a second time, by means of two petitions, of which one should be presented by the abbot of Châtillon, in the name of the Reform, and the other in the name of the abbé de Rancé." He: always he—the lone knight! The affair concerned him no more than other abbots—concerned him, in fact, not at all. He reigned in his Trappe an absolute sovereign, and it is obvious enough that had the General presumed to intervene in his administration—which the Brief gave him the right to do—he would have been very coolly—or very warmly—received.

All this by the way. His petition was a splendid piece of work. Some even attributed it to Bossuet. Wrong, cries Dubois: "Not to reproduce this document in the

history of our celebrated Reformer would be to detach a precious stone from his crown."

Great King, save us from the Pope: there you have the whole masterpiece in two words. " They force us to return to Rome "—they being the Grand Council—" and involve us thereby in a well-nigh endless train of affairs, processes and expenses "—to say nothing of temptations. " And thus, it must come to pass that, deprived of all the means necessary for our conservation in the shelters to which Divine Providence has withdrawn us "—one would think they were trying to expel him from La Trappe—" the Strict Observance, formed as from the ruins of this great Order, will be submerged in the universal shipwreck, if your Majesty does not deign to stretch out his hand over it. . . ."

He is convinced that he will be abused as " turbulent, temerarious and ambitious." But—" Charity which wishes, almost in every circumstance, that we should hide the faults and weaknesses of our enemies, constrains me in this to discover those of my brethren." Trust charity to choose Rancé for this sort of task! He is determined that this debate between meat and abstinence shall not appear too small a matter to occupy the attention of Louis XIV. If the appeal is rejected, the whole country will suffer:

" The saints have in the past attributed the persecutions of the church, the ravages of the barbarians in Italy and the sack of Rome to the evil lives of the ecclesiastics of their time . . . are there not just reasons to fear . . . that (God) is angered to see that so many houses of religious, which should be like so many sanctuaries, are now only a retreat for those whose principal occupation seems to be to attack

the glory of His name and to violate the sacredness of His law? . . ."

In other words they eat meat three times a week.

"May He not chastise a licence so scandalous and so manifest by signal punishment! And may those who once, by their holiness of life, were the pillars of States and of the Church, not become the misfortune and the curse by the disorder of their conduct."

"Take up thy thunderbolt, Louis"—and let no vain scruples hinder the Eldest Son of the Church! It is not from the sovereign authority of Peter, it is from the Holy See wrongly informed that we appeal to the secular arm. Rome would never have taken such fatal measures if "to speak as St Bernard spoke, she had not been surprised by the artifices and the pressing solicitations of (our) adversaries."

At the end of this rare document, Dubois raves!—"How pure, apt and noble the language! How reverential! How one feels the *grand siècle* and the *grand Roi*, even under the pen of a poor monk." Does it breathe Catholic obedience in the same measure? But of course! "Men will not fail to object," he concludes, "that Rancé was here demanding the intervention of the civil authority against the ecclesiastical. . . . We reply that that was not at all what he desired."

For the rest it would seem that the stylistic gourmets praised this morsel to the skies. "A great many copies were distributed and it was not possible to prevent its printing." He had rediscovered the graces of the *Provinciales* —with greater majesty.

The saintly abbé would have preferred no such worldly praises. "I did not think I had done so well," he wrote

to an over-enthusiastic friend: "if there are some passages which do not breathe the simplicity of the desert, it must be attributed solely to God, who was not content to inspire in me the design but chose to take special care of its execution." *Non nobis, Domine.* . . . To God alone the glory, not only for the challenge to the Holy See—that would go without saying—but also for the beauty of the style—the clause-laden style—in which the challenge was wrapped up! Matter and form—all is "inspired"—since in such a case the Holy Ghost could not allow M. de Rancé to offend the Academy!

Unfortunately there was but one member of the Academy, Harlay, the Archbishop of Paris, in the new commission named by the truly heroic patience of Louis XIV. Alas! Kings are, after all, like popes, groans Dubois.

Louis XIV "had not read . . . the primitive constitutions of Cîteaux. He imagined that the abbots of the Reform . . . were attacking the principle of authority, and must therefore be in the wrong. He explained the matter so, himself."

"I thought," he wrote, "that I must finish the affair of Cîteaux. . . . It would be a praiseworthy task for me to bring back so famous a body to the sanctity of its first foundation. . . . One party (the Common Observance) wished to carry out the Bull strictly, in the form in which it stood, the others demanded one quite different. . . . The former, who seemed more sincere, had on their side the authority of their rightful head (the Abbot of Cîteaux): the latter, who wished to appear more zealous, but who were perhaps only more factious, had at their head a few individual abbots and, demanding a more austere reform, apparently hoped to cover, under this specious pretext, the

plot they had formed to free themselves from the jurisdiction of the general. It even happened, owing to the great number of reasons and recommendations brought forth by the parties, that my Council was divided in opinion, so that I was reduced to the necessity of deciding the matter by my single vote." And he decided that they must abide by the Brief of Alexander VII.

Gallicanism is more excusable in a King of France than in an abbot: and, Gallicanism apart, this decision was, it seems to me, wisdom itself. At least Louis cannot be accused of having pronounced blindly. Rather, what with two campaigns and the distraction of his mistress, must he be admired for applying himself so seriously and with such good-will to a case which a more light-minded prince would have dismissed as ridiculous.

We know, of course, that the King did not publish his memoirs. The arguments—so strong, so lucid—that we have just read are not from his own pen but they sketch very accurately the process of his thought. "Factious" is too strong: but "perhaps" gives it the necessary modification.

The austerity of the Reformed abbots—Rancé included—was not a pretence. Neither their zeal for religion nor their essential sincerity can be called in doubt: nor can the less worthy passions which blinded their sincerity and touched their zeal with venom. According to Dubois, Louis XIV was at first in some sense dazzled by Rancé's splendid petition. I do not believe it. He was sated with that sort of sublimity. It is much more likely that he was reminded by this virulent address of the insolence of the Fronde and its "factious" rhetoric. Further the very violence of the accusations was enough to discredit the accuser. If the Non-Reformed had led the scandalous life

attributed to them by Rancé, the King would have known it: he would not have given them the decision any more than the Pope, equally well informed.

At any rate, however we may estimate the double victory of the Common Observance, Rancé's admirers and, with them, France and the Church must bless it. To this fortunate injustice—if injustice it is—we owe La Trappe. It is true that one cannot imagine Rancé not achieving great things, but perhaps he would have achieved something less but for the passion of defiance and revenge set blazing in him by this double defeat. So far he had only fought for the Strict Observance, as the fathers of the French Reform had conceived it. From now on, he would establish an observance twice as rigorous. Not content with continuing Dom Largentier, he would restore St Bernard. Before leaving Rome, writes Gervaise, he told Bona of the plan he had at heart to make the primitive spirit live again in his monastery and to set up again all the practices used since St Bernard.

"Since I cannot have the consolation of seeing in my lifetime this work of God throughout the Order, why shall I not have the courage to try at least to accomplish it in a particular house of which I am the master?"

So again, after the Chapter of 1667: "Seeing that there was no more to be done for the re-establishment throughout the Order of the primitive spirit of its founders; (and) that the Brief, far from imposing the Reform, did nought save authorise laxity, he resolved to do, at least in his own abbey, what he had vainly tried to do in all the abbeys of the Order."

All his friends—the Reformed like the rest—thought him mad. But he was Rancé. . . . His dream seemed wild, *was* wild; but he brought it to reality, point by point.

## Chapter IV

# THE AUSTERITIES AND THE APOTHEOSIS OF LA TRAPPE

In despair then, of converting the Non-Reformed, Rancé made up his mind henceforth to " narrow his own ways "— that is to reform the Reform itself and to revive at La Trappe the Clairvaux of St Bernard. A sublime venture, certainly; but chimerical? We shall see; impetuous, anyhow, and unmanageable as always, yet wise, as far as in him lay, and almost cautious. He went to work quickly enough, yet not too quickly. Gervaise has plotted very exactly the curve of this gradation.

" They lived at La Trappe as in all the houses of the Strict Observance, as in the Congregation of St Maur, and in all the reformed communities which had embraced the rule of St Benedict. That was all [Rancé] had been able to achieve in the short time that he had held this abbey . . . after having removed the disorder and the abominations which once reigned there. Any other man would have thought he had done well and would have rested at that. But this great soul regarded this form of life but as a shadow of what God was asking of him. On his return from Rome (1666) he began to discontinue the use of fish and of eggs, sold all the silver of the church and reduced it to the simplicity of the first Cistercians; withdrew his monks from the work of hearing confessions and preaching, in order to cut them off from all intercourse with the outer

world, banished all ordered studies from the monastery and substituted manual work. Soon after, he gave up the use of butter and condiments whose only effect is to excite sensuality . . . spices, sugar, jam, liqueurs"—he meant *sirops* not alcohol—"(were) banished for ever; those vegetables even which had some taste and savour—for a vegetarian can be a gourmet!—such as green peas, artichokes, celery, *cardons d'Espagne*, salsify, were permanently discontinued as so many delicacies."

To these vegetables *de luxe*, another passage of Gervaise adds cauliflowers.

"All was reduced to salt and water as sole seasoning; and what is more admirable, to introduce all these austerities among the monks and make them acceptable, he used no means save instruction and example."

Men in a hurry are not gluttons but Rancé had a very delicate stomach. Before his conversion he could swallow nothing but chicken's breast. This first change was the work of one year. The second stage was after the Chapter-General of Cîteaux (in May 1667): "The opposition he saw in this assembly, or rather the repugnance from all that may be called penance, austerity, mortification, did but inflame his zeal, and taking advantage of the fervour of his monks . . . he introduced into his house the most austere practices which he believed he could see in the conduct of the first founders of Cîteaux. So he established perpetual silence, and it was no longer permitted to the monks to say a single word to their brethren; all intercourse by visit or by letter was forbidden; the hardness of the beds was increased; before that time the straw mattresses were not sewn, one could change the straw every day and so fashion a fairly soft bed of a sort; they were reduced to

the hardness we see in them now; it is such that a level plank would be more bearable. To this discomfort was added that of sleeping in their hood . . . comforts were lessened in illness; at last these happy penitents now came to look upon their monastery as naught but a tomb, where they wished to be buried, the sooner to be united with Jesus Christ. The abbot, by his fiery exhortations, swept all along."

This progress was completed about 1670. In 1671—and thus in the very first years of the Reform—the rules for the sick were likewise drawn up. You will not find them in the earlier biographers, who recoiled in shame and fear before the terrible programme. Yet, as Dom Gervaise says reproachfully, that was "the great spectacle of La Trappe."

It was then ordained, "with the consent of all:

"(1) That doctors should for ever be excluded from the infirmaries of La Trappe, as men who served only to retain the monks in luxury and impenitence. The abbot had brought his monks to realise that they were disciples of Jesus Christ and not of Hippocrates. . . .

"(2) That the sick should never be confined to bed; that they should rise daily at half-past three and go to bed at the same time as the Community; that they should be present at all the Offices in the choir of the sick." Prayer, reading, manual work proportioned to their strength; absolute silence. . . .

"(3) They spend the night on a hard bed, fully dressed even to the hood, as they spend the day on a straw chair, against which they may not lean back or rest. . . . One may see sick men who, having been unable to rest all through the night . . . rise at half-past three, at the first

stroke of the bell, or get the infirmarian to raise them; they have been seen to die in the arms of the infirmarian as he was raising them."

And this, remember, is the evidence of an eye-witness, once Abbot of La Trappe.

"(4) The use of meat-soups is allowed only after the fourth or fifth attack of fever—that is to say, when the malady is practically desperate. Even then, only the weak and cowardly accept this solace . . .; the others persevered to the last breath without breach either of fast or of abstinence"—save in the very frequent instances where the superior ordered otherwise.

What follows is so stupendous that one blushes to find it horrible.

"(5) *They go to the church to receive the last Sacraments* leaning upon the arm of the infirmarian, and return in the same fashion to lie down again upon ashes and straw to await the happy moment which is to unite them with Jesus Christ."

The sublimity of the *Te Deum* is a pallid thing by comparison with the picture called up by these few lines, particularly the first.

"(6) If one recovers and enters upon convalescence—which happens rarely—the comforts granted him are very simple. The diet consists in soup at midday to which is added a little piece of beef or mutton. Two boiled eggs and a baked apple are all their supper.

"(7) Nothing is said here of biscuits, or jam. . . ." These delicacies had long ago been proscribed. "It would have been a crime to find the least trace of them in the monastery.

" (8) There is no dispensary and drugs are never bought." The ordinary treatment was bleeding, and a certain purgative powder (rhubarb). . . .

" (9) No matter how rigorous or severe the winter, fire is never lighted in the infirmary till after Prime "—six o'clock in the morning, and they had been up since half-past three. A man must have experienced it " to appreciate the rigour of this penance." After Compline, " there is no fire in the infirmary.

" (10) Nor are they exempt in sickness any more than in health from correction, humiliation and penance. Once a week the abbot or the prior comes to hold the Chapter of the sick.

" These are the rules of the Infirmary at La Trappe."

And these are the marvels which Rancé's earlier biographers kept dark, so depriving the world " of one of the most beautiful things in his luminous course."

Yet Rancé was still not satisfied. From 1672 began what may well be the most nightmare torture man can dream—" the cells were for the sole purpose of repose. They were now to be entered only for sleep, and it was ordered that never again was a light to be taken into them. Spiritual reading, which before had been done in the cell, was now done in public in the cloisters."

Never truly alone: he who said, with so much holy pleasure—not to speak of truth—*cella continuata dulcescit*, seems a sybarite beside these monks.

" The deeper they explored antiquity by the assiduous reading of St Bernard and the first monks of the Order, the more they strove to approximate to their way of life. . . . The one thing that worried these fervent

monks was that in the beginning all Christians had but a single meal, and that in the evening, on fast days. . . . The abbot, who had often spoken to them of this practice . . . believed that the moment had come to follow out in his monastery, even to the smallest details, the practices of Christian Antiquity. Thus he readily accorded them the grace they craved. The Lents of 1673 and 1674 were thus strictly observed. But one meal was taken in the day, after Vespers, between four and five in the afternoon; and on the other fast days, which last seven months in the year, after None—about three. But they had not sufficiently reflected that the scanty nourishment they obtained at this meal was not enough to sustain them for twenty-four hours. For the most part, strength failed them; they fell from inanition and the abbot found himself obliged to withdraw an austerity which they were unable to bear. The hour of the meal was fixed permanently at half-past twelve on fasts of the Church and at midday on fasts of the Order." A perfectly balanced superior might perhaps have yielded sooner to such evidence; the experience of one Lent would have sufficed.

Still, that is not all:

"To compensate for this loss, they added to their Lenten penance another practice formerly in use in the Order, one of the most deadly practices of all. It consists in going barefoot, on Good Friday, from Prime, which begins on that day at half-past four, till the Adoration of the Cross which does not end till just on two o'clock in the afternoon; further they sing the hundred and fifty Psalms between Prime and Terce; so that this ten or twelve hours continual chant, along with the nakedness of their feet, in a very damp house, joined to a bread-and-

water fast, reduces their bodies to such an extremity that a year seldom passes without Good Friday costing some monk his life."

And we nearly forgot, among less thorny details, "the astounding practice of not telling a religious who had just lost father or mother, of the loss he had suffered—on the principle that for him all is dead in the world."

It really seems that, in this, inhumanity passes all bounds: "Neither St Benedict," writes Dom Canivet, "nor St Bernard saw things in this light and the *Us de Cîteaux* indicate a contrary practice."

With that, concludes Dom Gervaise tranquilly, "it was considered that things had been pushed as far as they could go, and they thought more of preserving the good that had been achieved than of adding new austerities. It was towards this preservation that all the abbot's cares were directed, and he overlooked nothing"—needless to say—"to maintain his monks in these holy practices."

Less than ten years—1666-75—had sufficed for the completion of the astonishing structure.

The whole of France followed step by step the progress of the adventure, at first rather with stupefaction than enthusiasm—stupefaction that was merely goggling in some, anxious or annoyed in others—but thoroughly incredulous in all. Too much was—too much. So wild a display of fireworks must soon burn itself out. The dictatorial impetuosity of the abbot was well known—blazing swiftly into rage and violent action, but soon exhausted. Nor, in the earlier years, had he more than a half-score of monks. Recruits did not pour in. When, in this poverty of subjects, he had addressed himself to the Vicar-General of the Strict Observance, urging him to send religious or novices

that the work might continue, the Vicar-General had excused himself. He could not, he said, "oblige any monk to embrace a reform which, laudable as it might be, exceeded in severity the rule and the constitutions. Only the movement of a special grace would give strength for it."

"I can say," he added, "that you will have many admirers but few imitators. Of necessity you must use the people you have and receive novices animated by the same spirit when it shall please Our Lord to send them; for as far as the other Reformed monasteries are concerned, it does not seem that any can come to you from them who would be suitable."

It is easy enough to understand what he had in mind, and the sentiments of the other abbots of the Reform were no more cordial. "I assure you," the Abbot of La Trappe wrote later, even when success seemed to have proved him right—"it is incredible how strong is the temptation against the life we lead. Even our friends, under the most charitable pretexts, fail in this like our enemies. They imagine that, to give permanence to the good that may be in our monastery, it is necessary to moderate its austerity and its discipline. They bring forward a mass of specious reasons which so far have not convinced me."

The letter written to him on this subject by a bishop friendly to him is too amusing not to be quoted:

"I believe, Monsieur, that the quality of the food you give your monks does more than anything to make them ill"—about this time, they were dying like flies. "Your chant, your labour, your moist and watery air all wear out the body—to say nothing of the solitude, the silence, the discipline. I have always believed that a half-measure of

wine would sustain the stomach, whereas your cyders weaken and relax it. So also a couple of eggs for dinner with a portion of vegetables would support them and warm up their languishing chests, and, as the meal is well before bed-time, it would not produce the ill effects that one has reason to apprehend from these foods. If, on the feast of your Patron and on the four great feasts of the year, you were to give fish to all your community, you would be doing nothing that was not done at the beginning of your Order . . .; and these small things, which seem mere nothings, and can cause neither intemperance nor laxity, would help marvellously to brighten the heart, re-animate the body and encourage a more zealous progress in the way of penance. . . . St Augustine, St Gregory . . . otherwise the good you have done in your abbey will end with you, and in these slight concessions you would find the means of perpetuating it."

All very well, you say. Yet don't you feel floating up from this episcopal letter an appetising odour, symbol of a less sublime philosophy? Monsignor Sancho Panza! Why must virtue, that rare mean between two extremes, so often have—precisely *because* it is a mean—a dingy and slightly comic air? With his half-dozen gudgeons for the four great feasts, our bishop would scarcely have made the monks' mouths water if Rancé had read them his letter. Judged from this point of view, Rancé seems unreasonable; yet it would not be the first time that sanctity had chosen some other model than the plain and easy going good-sense of the "natural man."

After all, if we discuss the various points one by one, the rude programme we have just sketched need not move us so much. There are in it, of course, certain vexatious

extravagances—which the Trappists of the future allowed to drop—but, such details apart, the imagination of a Christian is soon at home with these so-called horrors. I do not say that I would go off tomorrow and bury myself at La Trappe. But as a historian and student of morals, I seek only the explanation of the miracle; and I am certain of this: that after so many saints—monks or not—whose secrets I have learnt, the prowess of Rancé and his disciples does not take my breath away.

Besides—even in the most fervent communities, the written rule is one thing, the daily and hourly *practice* is another. And this is even more likely to be true when the rule has been improvised and decreed by a Rancé. The wisest men have never managed to foresee every thing. Sooner or later, certain modifications force their way in. An example may make my meaning clear. There is a case in point, perfectly absurd as it happens, which we find in the earliest *Description de l'Abbaye de la Trappe*—that which appeared in 1670. The abbot "chooses the most laborious work and spares himself so little that in summer he, like his monks, leaves work, bathed in sweat, to go to the church, where at that time it is very cold. Thus they all stay with water on their bodies, which remains under their serge habits so that they return to tomorrow's work still moist from today's."

In vain does Gervaise swear by all his gods that no such thing was ever the practice at La Trappe, where, be it noted, he himself did not enter till much later. We do not believe him. The story could not have been published without the express approbation of the Father Abbot. But Rancé must soon have seen—at any rate after the tenth inflammation of the lungs—that such recklessness

was indefensible and must be stopped. Well before the arrival of Gervaise "it is ordered that the monks, when they leave their work bathed in sweat shall go into their cell to change their tunic . . . when they fail to do this they are reprimanded, cleanliness being in no way opposed to the spirit of mortification . . .; besides, fraternal charity demands that one should not incommode his neighbours in choir."

Other modifications of the same sort must have crept in—particularly in the matter of the sick. By their bedside, the casuistry of charity found means to evade, or even on occasion flatly to defy, the rigidities of the rule. The summoning of a doctor was a rare event, yet it was not unheard of.

In reply to another prelate who had tried gently to urge him to more moderation, Rancé wrote: "I know not what brings the world to consider as something extraordinary [a way of life] which contains naught but what is very common. . . . We do not see any objection raised [to the penances of the early Christians] nor any charge of indiscretion or extravagance brought either against those who instituted them, or those who practised them. You will admit that when what we are doing is brought into comparison with what was done [by the Fathers of the Desert], there is a well-nigh infinite distance between their way of life and ours."

This is too strong. Considered from the right point of view—that is from the point of view of the difficulties to be overcome—these seventeenth-century Trappists show no less a generosity than the saintly *fellahs* of the Thebaïd. But no matter.

"I assure you that what we are doing seems to us of so

small account and we find therein so great facility, that far from being content with ourselves and satisfied with our works, we find in both perpetual sources of humiliation and confusion."

This seems to me the real truth for practically all of them. Gervaise draws a distinction to which we most heartily subscribe. For him there is nothing really terrible in the rules of La Trappe save the rules for the sick.

" Ordinary virtue is sufficient to enable a man in health to live there happy and content; but to sustain a man in sickness, more than human virtue is necessary."

" Ordinary virtue " means, obviously, ordinary in proportion to the average conditions of the religious life. " The monk," writes Dubois, " is a man different in make-up from other men ": yet not more so, it seems to me, than the sailor, the miner, or the *savant*. This special make-up is acquired quickly enough. Monks are made, not born.

In the fervour of the novitiate, no mortification is a serious difficulty to a young man who, to come there at all, has steeled himself to cruel sacrifices. After that the mould is set, at least in the matter of external practice; what to us seems unbearable is a mere straw to him.

" The habits I have contracted these thirty years," wrote Rancé, " cause me scarcely to feel what we practise here."

Pascal's word " a machine," is exactly the right word; and in this connection it contains no note of depreciation, since, after all, this automatism is something that the monk has created with the sweat of his brow.

" At La Trappe," says Lenain, " monks have been known, who after having been two or three hundred times to the refectory, did not know where it was. They

simply followed those who went there. . . . Likewise they came and went to and from work, one behind another, seeing nought save the steps of those who walked before them." "Never once having raised his eyes," a novice did not know how the top of his cell was made. In telling this, Lenain would have us admire their modesty. And admire it we do, but with the added consideration that the first strong struggles against the temptations of curiosity would gradually have faded into the untroubled habit of lowered eyes. For the least departure from the normal, they had to seek permission of the abbot or the prior. "Some have been seen who dared not even separate the leaves of their book, stuck together by the binding, without asking permission." A brother arrived late in the refectory "and finding nothing in his place whereon to sup, set himself at the table, said *Benedicite*, waited quite tranquilly. The refectorist, who had completely forgotten him, brought him nothing. After this brother had waited as long a time as he would have spent in eating, he rose from the table, said his grace and departed as content as if he had supped well."

There is no La Trappe comparable to the life of certain families, said one of them with humorous misogyny, "where we are seems to me a bed of roses compared with what we know happens to people ill-sorted in marriage."

In short, for them the real thorns are in none of these exterior things, but much more in the unceasing rebellion of the spirit. Those who left La Trappe at any stage after the novitiate—and naturally there was more than one of them—were vanquished not by the austerity of the life, but nearly always by some sting of hurt vanity. One of them could not tolerate not having been raised to the

office of prior. Another departed after ten years of a life, not merely exemplary, but so mortified that his brethren saw in him a new St Anthony. Again a certain Non-Reformed, after a quarrel with his abbot, took refuge at La Trappe. In an instant he was at home there, wasting no regrets, either on the plentiful table of the Common Observance, or on their linen shirts, or on their pocket-money. Suddenly he learnt of the death of the abbot, his old enemy, and henceforth his one idea was to return to his first monastery. In chapter and in chapel he would snap his fingers at the shade of the deceased. In vain they tried to keep him. Yet once back, he was homesick for La Trappe. Willingly would he return, but his vanity feared the charge of inconstancy: so he left his abbey, "gave up his religious habit, turned soldier, went to England and became a Protestant."

On one occasion, the Duke of Orleans brought to Versailles from La Trappe a piece of their black bread. It was passed from hand to hand. They felt its weight, smelt it, swooned with admiration. Quite a good lesson for gourmands. But for a Trappist, after five or six meals this bread was not black. A morning's work done, they ate with hearty appetite and without noticing what they ate. It may be that this diet spelt ruin to delicate stomachs, but what was that to them, save death come a little sooner?

Manual work—five hours per day, divided into two periods—weighed less on them than might be thought. Many Provençals work longer on a Sunday on their property, this being the somewhat uncanonical form their Sabbath observance takes. For most of these monks, the deciphering of a palimpsest would have seemed harder work than digging furrows. And they worked practically

elbow to elbow, so that a man heard the fragments of psalms murmured by his neighbour. From this work in common, which was likewise prayer in common, arose a gentle hum, very compelling as in the offices of the liturgy. The unfatiguing but always solitary labour of the Carthusian is surely more rigorous.

Their unbroken silence has done more to glorify the Trappists than all their other austerities. At first, admittedly, it impresses us greatly—perhaps because we have never tried it ourselves. Speech is doubtless an essential need of man, and in consequence a nearly indispensable pleasure. La Trappe satisfied the *need*, and as for the *pleasure*, far from combating it, they gave it a subtler refinement.

In fact, save at recreation, a Jesuit novitiate is more silent than La Trappe. The silence of the Trappist must be understood in a special sense, like the silence of deaf-mutes: the mouth gives no sound, but the fingers speak and all the body with them. (All this is very much like the common belief that Southern Europeans are more talkative than the rest of men. An illusion this, and a puerile illusion. Before opening their mouths, they have already said all they have to say. The words that follow are mere politeness, in no way necessary.) Thanks to the use they made of signs, the monks of Cluny had " changed their hands into tongues." Those of La Trappe who were not from the South, had to acquire this sign-language. But this very apprenticeship was but an added pleasure, of the sort that the Chinese find in constructing their calligrams.

For every new situation that had to be expressed—and daily life may be relied on to provide new situations in

plenty—they had to think out some special piece of mimicry, add new combinations to the conventional gestures. Rancé, so deeply scandalised by the study of Greek among the Benedictines of Saint-Maur, realised well enough that his rule set the Trappists to efforts of language far more complicated—and hence far more seductive.

" An abbé of some importance, a doctor of the Sorbonne, having seen the inmates of La Trappe greet one another and converse in signs . . . wished, before departing, to be enlightened on all these gestures: the Reverend Father made this answer: ' I assure you that I do not understand any more than you, what my brethren mean by their signs. I watch them often from a room in the infirmary, but without avail. What I can tell you is that such is their manner of conveying their meaning, and such the respect that they show one to another, that at the slightest sign, everything drops from their hands. . . .' At this, the learned doctor replied, with tears in his eyes: ' Is it possible that in this age of ours, there are men of this stamp! I shall never forget these miracles of grace and these marvels of our day.' " The doctor, to be sure, was a Northerner, and not very bright at that.

The code of " polite society," to which Rancé justly held that they should conform, added new and quite charming difficulties to mimic expression. " He took very great care that the monks should live together with all sorts of honours, esteem, courtesy and respect." Smiles were forbidden, but I doubt the completeness of their obedience in *this* matter.

To understand a man who speaks only by signs—whether conventional or spontaneous, it is necessary to watch him more closely. The language of the dumb is

less noisy and more revealing than the other. Not only does it say with perfect precision, what one wants said: it also betrays what one would have preferred to keep hidden—antipathy, for example, mistrust, jealousy, smouldering wrath. There is something moving in the thought of the thousand dramas that may have been gestating in that great silence. If the abbot "learnt that one of his monks had something on his mind . . . against another, he would take him apart and say all the good he could of him against whom the hatred lay, and doing the same with the other, and thus having disposed them to peace, he did not leave them till they had embraced. If one was unaware of the other's hate, he took all necessary measures to keep him from that knowledge: but, having dispersed the clouds, he had them both brought into his presence, and opening his heart to them he brought them to do likewise, each to the other."

In such a case, you may be sure that they did not stop short at signs. Charity comes before all things. And this pleasing scene reminds us that when the burden of silence was more than a monk could bear, he had but to knock at the cell of Father Abbot, who was ever ready to receive him. They did not deny themselves the privilege, and we are told that usually they were received with immense cordiality. By that above all—the charm of his speech—he held them. And as nothing escaped him, he probably met the gloomy more than half way.

Again in this question of silence, common sense did not abate its rights, or if it did, it gradually regained them. "Dom Augustin taught the novices the chant in profound silence," but the novices, who had not attained so great a virtuosity in the language of signs, might speak to him

" of what bore directly on the chant." Occasionally they carried silence a shade too far—as far maybe as absurdity: without, I fear, arousing the displeasure of the abbot. The good Lenain, desperately naïve, relates ridiculous anecdotes which set Rancé's panegyrist shedding tears of tenderness.

" A lay-brother was working without," writes Dubois; " returning he encountered . . . the bull . . . which flung itself raging upon him, hurled him over with a violent blow of its head, and worried him with its horns. In his panic, he began to cry out: but he did not fail at the next chapter to accuse himself as of a grave infidelity. Another would have been crushed to death without uttering a word, if his companions, seeing the imminent danger in which he was, had not made haste to free him from a great stone which had swung against him while it was being hoisted from a quarry, and held him pinned against the wall. He would have perished . . . without uttering a cry, that he might not break the sacred vow of silence. . . . It is always a great spectacle, that of a man doing his duty . . . at the risk of his life."—Though, to be precise, this particular man failed in his first duty, which was to cry out, since suicide is not a virtue. In any case, it is obvious that neither Lenain nor Dubois would have admired this pair of scrupulous and ill-balanced religious, if the saintly abbot had given them the sort of rebuke which was their due: a few cups of lime-water to calm them down, then prison—two days for the first who at least *had* cried out: four for the second. For La Trappe had its prison, as abbeys had in those days, and used it for something else than keeping ploughs and spades out of the rain. But these eccentric feats caused him real joy. He felt that in

them—and thanks to himself—the great days of the Thebaïd had returned. "The Reverend Father was one day giving a lecture in the wood, when a monk, having seen a toad entering a hole on the very spot where he was about to sit, was frightened, and showed it by some involuntary gesture. The Reverend Father, ever on the watch to exercise his brethren in virtue, said: 'What, Father, you are afraid of a toad! What would you do if bears and lions were let loose on you as on the martyrs? . . . On the first opportunity you will bring me one in your hands!' The monk, taking this as a command, did indeed bring one to the saintly abbot, who immediately ordered him to throw it away, admiring his obedience."

A paltry reconstruction of the classic legend: the Father of the Desert asks a novice to catch a lioness and lead her to him: he obeys and—of course—the worthy beast lets herself be brought with much complaisance. By all means let us enjoy our fairy tales, but in Heaven's name leave to children the amusement of actually playing at them. After the age of ten, it is no longer permissible to play at martyrdom. Yet Rancé was built like it. To his passion for command not only the free-will of his monks must obey, but even their uncontrollable reflexes. The first stirrings of disgust are forbidden them, equally with smiles.

Yet notice that, in its hero, this adventure reveals simplicity rather than exaltation. La Trappe under Rancé seems to have been fundamentally sane. There is no reason to think that their perpetual silence had muddled their brains. With the exception of one short period—August to November 1685—devils visited them little. It was upon Rancé that it fell to bear the brunt of their assault—the right man, if ever there was one, to stand up to them.

"He would hear a sharp and piercing cry resound in his ears: sometimes there was rude thumping on his door . . .: he heard . . . loud noises." These devils were discreet beings: a few visions or rather auditions: which are well known to be the least unnerving. We know our Lenain—had there been anything more, he would have told us.

"Once the community being in choir, as soon as they had begun the office, all the monks, to the number of over fifty, seemed very clearly to hear angels singing their melody . . . mingling their voices with their own." Rancé is very amusing in this incident. "The Reverend Father, who was told the story, said that he believed he also had heard it; but that they did not deserve that God should show them such a favour." You see his dilemma—for obviously he had not heard anything in particular, yet on the other hand, if angels really had come, he could scarcely admit that they had neglected to invite *him*.

Such, then, are the famous austerities which at the time provoked so much enthusiasm, and such lively criticism. On either side—for and against—there was a sort of stupefaction, of which I am quite prepared to feel my share, provided I am allowed to deck it out with a little humour: a humour which the Trappists not only pardon, but actually advise. Certain hot partisans of La Trappe, and certain enemies likewise, are far too much like those idlers who group gaping round the easel of a painter—Is it possible? How does he do it?—We are less staggered. Like all rules for a perfect life, Rancé's reform brings us *to the extreme limits of human capacity;* but beyond the limits of humanity—of humanity, that is, redeemed and made new by Christ—it does not go.

They were neither super-men nor super-saints. Shorn of a few extravagances not of its essence, their programme seems entirely reasonable. We Christians of the third zone may be terrified by it, but we are in no way shocked. So that the supreme glory of Rancé is not so much to have constructed the plan of this Reform, as to have succeeded, and so fully succeeded, in winning men to embrace it.

A life of that sort was very much in the air. Practically all the older Orders had subjected themselves, with marvellous ease and rapidity, to observances which, if less rigid than Rancé's, were still definitely strict. The logic of grace could allow no stopping half-way. From all sides, from monasteries and the world, recruits came to him. But, with the first flush of sacrifice over, the great majority of these recruits did not look back, but let themselves be fashioned by those terrible hands: that was the miracle, and *his* miracle. He has given our admiration some rude shocks, and will give it more: but he cannot altogether stamp it out.

"The first Reformed monks at La Trappe," writes Gervaise, "never offered any resistance to anything that their abbot demanded of them: they entered easily into all his ideas, and he had so gained their hearts by his pleasant and captivating manners, by his eloquence, by his boundless charity"—we might add by his driving energy—"that they even anticipated his wishes and were the first to ask of him what they knew would give him pleasure."

Besides he was always the first in setting an example. After 1676, the pain of his paralysed hand and the distractions we are to speak of, caused him to mingle but intermittently in the life of the community; but during the critical foundations years, he did not leave the "work-

shop," and his personal exertions were immense. In manual labour, for instance, he shirked nothing: between him and the most laborious of his monks, there was no difference—save in the number of his breakages. "So much vigour and zeal that it was not rare to see him break . . . the tools." Did we mention, in the chapter on his youth, that he never went out on horseback without returning alone, on foot and in rags? "One day," relates Dom Lenain, "the hook he was using having parted with its handle, he fell over backwards on the dung-heap. And when sympathy was expressed, he said that he preferred that this accident should have happened to him rather than to another." Upon this story Dubois feels called upon to pin an edifying frill. In place of the simple "he said" of Lenain, he puts that Rancé "replied gayly and by signs." "Gayly" maybe: but "by signs"? Scarcely.

He was for all of them a mighty personality. "It was not possible," says Lenain, "either to look upon him or to approach him without respectful fear. There was in his outward appearance a majesty which could come only from the God of Majesty, since it made such vivid impressions on men's hearts that upon merely seeing him and being in his presence, they were sensibly stricken, involuntarily and without conscious reflection, with a profound veneration for his person, which led them to love him and to fear nothing save to displease him. And when he was speaking, it seemed that it was God Himself who spoke. . . . Many, when their conscience accused them of some fault, dared not come before him, not doubting that he knew by inspiration what lay most hidden in their heart."

Fear was the dominant feeling, but mingled with it was a tenderness that went deeper than fear. We shall see how

he bullied them, but his monks never believed that there was any cause of complaint in that. "He made on men's minds such impressions as he wished"—but that he might appear simple, affectionate, truly human, he did not always need any conscious effort. In the infirmary above all, if I read him right, they must have learnt to know the better Rancé—as true as the other, if not more so. When he entered, "it seemed that the sick forgot their weaknesses and their lethargy, and came to him, their hearts full of joy, like children to their father who, in a tone of love and kindness, inquired of each of them how he was, of what he stood in need. So much so that there were those who, for having seen him, were as well content as if they had been cured."

For most of them—one only excepted, perhaps—that was the first time since their entry into the abbey that they had dared to show him how they loved him. Before dying, their heart thus poured itself out in a measureless joy. But there was at least one who did not wait for sickness: Brother Dosithée was as awe-stricken as the rest, but he could no longer hold in his love. "As to the feelings he had for the Father Abbot," we read in the *Relation* of his death, "it would be difficult to show them as they were. There is no better means of conveying them than to repeat his expressions and his own terms as he spoke of him. He came to seek him one day and threw himself at his feet; he laid open all the love for him that God had put in his heart, and after having told him that he owed him his conversion, his salvation, his happiness . . . and many other things of like sort, he said: 'I honour you, I revere you, I love you, I have no single consolation greater than to see you and hear you, and when I am

in your presence, my eyes and my heart eat you, devour you.'"

His valet de chambre, Frère Antoine, Frère Dosithée, many of his monks—for there *were* recalcitrants—are the true witnesses for Rancé before the bar of history. Nor must we leave Dosithée without seeing him die. Having received Extreme Unction, he immediately asked that he might be laid on the ashes and the straw; and, having risen from the edge of his bed, as he was going to the straw, which had been spread for him, and was walking with much trouble so that someone spoke a few words as though to give him courage, he replied: "I do not go, I run." George Eliot pities the host of poor wretches who have only the heart of a poet and not the voice. Dosithée was no more of a saint than the Trappist average: but he had more than most others the voice and the words of a saint.

Two deeply pathetic, if slightly theatrical, scenes show us Rancé rousing his little army and spurring with them upon the enemy—that is to say, the Order of Cîteaux. Vague rumours—mere gossip really—had led him to believe that the Common Observance were preparing a formidable counter-offensive. No less a project was in the wind than to get from the Pope and the King a condemnation of the Reform, now convicted of madness beyond all doubt. The threat was imaginary, it seems to me. The campaign never went beyond parlours and pamphlets. Their unmeasured criticism of him was a very fair return for his unmeasured criticism of them. We often find him vigorous in this sort of mêlée. But it was his pleasure to act the persecuted victim, the martyr. And he may well have felt so at this moment, for events seemed to be

justifying the enemy. One after another, in the space of a few months, death had struck down six or seven of his most fervent monks. Others were dying. Having therefore gathered the decimated battalion in an Extraordinary Chapter, he said: "I cannot conceal from you, Brethren, that we are exposed to extreme trials: that our Observance is threatened with general destruction and that we have all to fear from men." There were two possible lines of conduct: "Either to make new concessions to the flesh, to restore our strength . . . at the expense of penance, and thus through false discretion and real infidelity, abandon the strait and narrow way, to take the broad!" or else "to bind ourselves by new engagements for the exact observance of the rule." At once daunted hearts sprang once more to courage; all subscribed the splendid formula he held prepared:

"We, monks of the Maison-Dieu, Notre Dame de la Trappe, . . . being solely occupied with thoughts of the things of eternity, which the wasting away of our health keeps unceasingly before our eyes, as well as the number of our brethren whom God has just . . . called to Himself by a happy death; wishing to prepare ourselves to appear before the tribunal of Jesus Christ, . . . we swear this day to keep our holy rule in all its extent, . . . to observe till our last breath all the practices which are established in this house . . . and to resist, by every means permitted and lawful, all those who would, under any pretext whatever, introduce the least relaxations."

As a defiance of death, nothing could be more sublime. But as a defiance of the Common Observance, it seems to me a little overdone. Why mingle the smell of powder with the incense of sacrifice?

Years afterwards, in 1694, once more a prey to panic, he essayed a new plebiscite with the same success. "It seemed," wrote the simple Lenain, "that all Hell was let loose at once against the abbot and his children. The public were complaining that the abbot of La Trappe was treating his monks with such severity that they were losing their vocation: the rumour was set going that a score of them, in the name of the Community, had risen against him in the refectory and declared that they were no longer willing to lead a life so austere. . . . Many anonymous letters were sent to him on the same subject . . . and even to the abbot of Cîteaux, who scorned these communications" —for all that he was a Moderate. It was all wildly exaggerated, yet some foundation there assuredly was. There had been no uprising, but four or five monks having left the monastery, the chief of the band, whether to justify himself or to indulge his rancour, kept repeating in word and in writing that under so inhuman an abbot, life at La Trappe had become intolerable.

Yet it all amounted to very little. By 1694 the battle was long over: Rancé had won. Neither his personal prestige nor his work were endangered by a handful of anonymous letters. The Abbot of Val-Richer, subjected to similar calumnies, simply let them die of themselves. "He had as a maxim that a truly humble Christian had usually no better method of justifying himself than to remain silent: and he was convinced that it was the most certain means of silencing slander." But Rancé was of another sort. At the least contradiction, at the most insignificant attack, he took fire. Perhaps also, less sure of his brethren and of his Reform itself than he should have been, he was in fear of other defections. Be that as

it may, he sounded the alarm and produced another resolution from his monks. The form is as curious as it is beautiful.

" Having learnt that ill-intentioned or ill-informed people are spreading in the world the rumour that the life we have embraced is beginning to be burdensome to us . . . to the point of causing several to wish to quit their own house . . . and to seek elsewhere an easier, more relaxed life, we have thought . . . that we must make the following declaration . . . which we do in full liberty."

And they renew their promise to observe in its integrity Rancé's rule and all the " practices established in this monastery . . . among which the chief are the quality and austerity of the food, the exact observance of fasts, patience in illness, silence, watching, manual work, solitude . . . in fine contempt of all that is passing, hope of all that is eternal, desire of death and continual meditation thereon."

You see they address the public at large: they reply to their handful of slanderers by a proclamation that is to be spread everywhere. A strong reply and deeply sincere—but futile and ill-advised. The small number of people who might have been moved by the anonymous letters—for after all it was no more than that—could only think that the manifesto had been extorted from the alarmed monks by some new and serious assault.

To the staging of this second scene, Rancé, whose imagination never fell weary, had added a little unexpected touch: the choir monks having signed the declaration, he had the doors of the Chapter opened to the lay-brothers, who were not usually present at these conferences. Fifteen professed and four novices, they entered uneasily and did not know where to dispose themselves. He told them

what had taken place, and one by one he questioned them. "Tell us then candidly, brother"—he was speaking to the senior lay-brother—"if the life you lead is not too hard, if you would be glad to have it softened in some point, moderated in some way." Whereat the good brother replied with much simplicity—"simplicity" is Dubois's word, not, I think, mine—that "for the twenty years he had been in the house, he had found nought that was not pleasant and easy in the life he had led; that if there were anything to change, it should be to make the way narrower not broader."

Thus the senior: and thus, with more or less eloquence, all the others—save the eleventh. We must not be hard on him. After all, his opinion *had* been asked, and give it he would! In truth he made no complaints: yet he thought, in his poor brain, that after all a few alleviations would not be amiss; but doubtless he was wrong, since he was alone in so thinking. A charming soul this Number Eleven. He may not have had all the virtues: but at least he had the virtue of saying what he thought, and that in the face of the abbot himself.

Rancé took it well. "He was frank," Dubois comments, "and he loved frankness; so, while interiorly he sighed for the poor man's weakness, he felt only that he must exhort him to take courage and rest his confidence in God. Some time later he sent him to a monastery of a less strict observance; one more proof that it was not his way to crush his brethren, burdening them beyond their strength, and that he had no wish for slaves." Quite right! quite right! yet for my part I think I would have kept Number Eleven. Humanity, frankness, courage—he may well have been the stuff that saints are made of.

In spite of certain weaknesses which are not difficult to guess, and which I should blush to explore further, the little we have said shows well the solid greatness of La Trappe, thus become in so short a space a veritable nursery-garden of saints. Sainte-Beuve has put it excellently: "The history of La Trappe is that of imperceptible, silent, hidden progresses: the rumour that comes to us without, is the least part, and often the part least worthy to be seen. Its rigour became an irresistible attraction for some: they hastened to La Trappe from neighbouring monasteries, as to a hive of more celestial honey. Rancé might have styled himself a stealer of souls. . . . By 1672, La Trappe had attained its high perfection, the fullness of its monastic renown, and one more original movement was added—in the shade—to the wonderful splendour which shone upon this moment of Louis XIV's reign."

But why "in the shade"? The special point of this mystic hearth was that, while others guard their secret for a few chosen souls, the blaze of its flames was seen everywhere. And Sainte-Beuve knew it. "As the century advanced," he writes, "the abbey of La Trappe gained in authority in the eyes of the world: it inherited the crowds who were no longer divided up among other holy places, which were henceforth suspect"—this for Port-Royal—"and inaccessible"—or without a halo. "Rancé became the single oracle of the Desert: the converted and the virtuous came to him. . . . Prelates, ecclesiastics, monks, laymen of all conditions followed one another endlessly. . . . 'To go to La Trappe,' said some great lord or other, 'is the passion of all good people.'"

Every year there were six or seven thousand pilgrims. What is the secret of these stars which draw such vast

masses to this or that holy place rather than to this or that other? Whence is their light? How do they grow in brilliance or lessen even to utter extinction? Clever propaganda is no explanation: conceivably it might keep them in life but it could never create them. Something else is there.

Anyhow our Abbot let himself be besieged without excessive repugnance. "I admit," he wrote one day, "that the number of those who have visited us this summer is extraordinary. And what is surprising is that it happened in spite of the resolution I had made to be more retired than ever."

To so flattering an assault his resistance was of necessity not obstinate. After all, did it not help the triumph of his Reform? He was without a rival in the staging of a scene, and could at need give just the touch which would pique the pious curiosity of the public. Had he lived in our days he would have given interviews to the daily papers and would probably have had La Trappe filmed. Yet in a sense he found a better way. Before his coming, the older Orders revealed to the outer world as little as possible of their interior life. Living or dead, their saints remained theirs, *secretum meum mihi*. For the crime of having the life of Dom Martin secretly printed, Martène was reprimanded by his superiors, and his book was suppressed. Rancé, moving with the times, openly lifted all veils and issued one by one, in fascicles, later bound in a volume, his famous (and admirable) *Relations de la vie et de la mort de quelques religieux de l'abbaye de la Trappe*. His first essays in this *genre* were coldly received. His friends trembled, in fear that this new form of publicity might attract the mockery of those who were already finding him a nuisance. The official censors delayed the *imprimatur*. But, though suspended for a time, the publication was

resumed. In fact it proved to be a master-stroke. Today, when books of this sort abound, it is not easy to imagine the prodigious success of the *Relations*. Some were absolute events, but none made more sensation than the relation of the death of the converted brigand, Dom Muce.

" It touched," writes Rancé, " a multitude of people of every condition—magistrates, soldiers, priests, monks, women, girls, who remained as though stricken in their sloth and in their sins, because they were persuaded that heaven was of bronze for them. . . . Awakened by the example of the conversion of this sinner . . . they threw themselves with confidence upon the breast of God."

Dom Muce's " voice of tears " penetrated even to Versailles. Someone at court wrote to Rancé: " Everyone has read with tears and with edification what you have written of Dom Muce's death: the King even has shed tears. Mme de Maintenon and several other ladies wept at it in such manner that some came to them to see what was the matter and those who came did likewise."

In vain Rancé's enemies whispered about that the relation was only a " poem in prose," and that the so-called brigand had never killed anything beyond roebucks. Rancé, we are told, found no difficulty in confounding these hypercritics. In all things generous, he may possibly have lent Dom Muce a few extra crimes, but Dom Muce, when he came to La Trappe, was no little saint. He had belonged to a " regiment of Grenadiers, who are universally known to be the most determined of those who follow the trade of war; (and) he had all the evil qualities of a man of that profession." Also as Rancé tells us, he had " rather the jowl of a lion than the mouth of a man." And why should we grudge their pious tears to Mme de Maintenon and Louis XIV?

But all these deaths are more admirable one than another. " The abbot having asked him [Frère Benoît Deschamps] if he was not going to Jesus Christ with confidence and joy; he replied 'Yes, Father, by God's grace. I feel no extraordinary elevation in God but by His mercy I am in profound peace.'"

"'When shall I have the consolation of hearing the hammer of death?' asks another. He was referring to the *tablette* usually struck to assemble the brethren when the sick are near to death." " The just man is full of confidence at death "—it is to that above all, the joyous serenity of all these dying men, that the *Relations* owed their immense success. By good fortune, eloquence is absent from these moving narratives. From a letter from Rancé to Nicaise on the death of the Marquis de Nocey, I cull this doubly delicious phrase: " God willed that he should not say anything remarkable, because so the account is shortened."

One more quotation: " The Prayers being finished . . . fearing, from some outward marks which appeared to him, that the Father Abbot was afflicted at his state, the dying man turned his head with his customary gaiety and held out his arms as though to embrace him and speak to him. The Father Abbot having brought his ear close to the monk's mouth, he laid hold of him as strongly as his extreme weakness would allow, and distinctly said to him these last words, as those he judged most capable of consoling him: 'Father, I am going to Our Lord in fullness of joy and consolation.'"

Here there is no faintest smell of the theatre. He is very beautiful, bending over each of his monks in their turn, watching and as though imploring in a sort of passion, a word, a sign, a last smile, to show that they are happy to have came to La Trappe, happy to be dying there.

## Chapter V

## "L'ABBÉ TEMPÊTE"

"L'Abbé Tempête" he was called, and with reason, in the entourage of his venerable friend Vialart, Bishop of Châlons. Now that he was reformer of La Trappe and would-be Reformer of the Universal Church, this picturesque sobriquet suited him better still. Cardinal Le Camus wrote the day after a visit to Rancé: "Each man finds something in La Trappe extraordinary, according to his temperament. The silence enchanted me, but it did not surprise me. When the world speaks to us no more and God alone speaks, it is a trouble to speak to the world. For my part, what has astonished me most, is the profound and unmurmuring obedience which the monks display towards their abbot. For he really drives them hard and censures them vigorously, and they bear it with great joy. As I have a great deal of pride, that is what has seemed to me most repugnant to the old Adam."

Yet he must have seen practically nothing. In the presence of his guests, Rancé's fulminations were merely ceremonial: he was only showing off. The more he feigned anger, the more completely he was master of himself: sham tempests of this sort startled the visitor more than they mortified the victim. Besides, Rancé was not the inventor of the custom of public humiliations. Monastic tradition had long since consecrated it and thereby in some sort robbed it of its sting. *Jacula feriunt minus*

*prævisa.* The monk confessing his fault in the midst of the Chapter is quite prepared in mind and heart for the corrections which are to follow. As to the superior charged with this unpleasant job, he usually bears very ill his rôle of outraged virtue. To the shorn lambs—the monks, that is, of the more sensitive sort—he tempers the wind. In this exercise, only exterior faults are proclaimed, yet these are not always the least humiliating in their public advertisement. In short, the business is usually a mild shower, more or less disagreeable, but soaking no deeper than the outer wrappings and not made worse by thunder and lightning.

Yet even in this matter Rancé was an innovator, and in two ways: first by violently dramatising the traditional exercise of self-accusation and abbatial censure; then by creating, anywhere and upon any pretext or no pretext, scenes which normally should only take place within the tranquillising secrecy of the Chapter. The few incidents I am about to record, chosen from a great number, are related by Dom Lenain, who does not for one moment dream that anyone can fail to share the gaping admiration they inspire in him.

Rancé insisted so rigorously on the night silence "that one day, when he who had to say the mass of Our Lady, which is said in the early morning for the lay-brothers, could not say it, one of these lay-brothers having drawn aside the Reverend Father, when Prime was sounded, to warn him that this mass had not been said"—four words: the brother, half-awake, had not been able to call to mind the necessary dumb-show—"the Father, to punish this transgression . . . came to the Chapter and addressed the lay-brother with such severity that he made all present tremble."

"A monk had accused himself of having read a few words in a paper he had found: the Reverend Father rebuked him so severely for his want of obedience that he made everyone tremble." Always this lashing of hail on the window-pane. "Then he put the whole community under penance for their brother's fault, made all his monks take the discipline in their cells and ordered special abstinences, not to speak of those which he imposed on the monk who had committed the fault, which he compared to that of Adam"—so that eloquence had its due, to say nothing of rhetoric.

"The brother in charge of the bakery, having by mistake made the community bread whiter than usual, the servant of God had the bell sounded for a special Chapter, ordered the cellarer to have the whole ovenful brought into the presence of all the monks, severely rebuked the baker and even the cellarer . . . (saying) that this was a beginning of relaxation, and that nought was needed beyond small things like this to destroy everything, and that it was not for poor monks to eat such bread. Having said this, he had all that had been cooked given to the poor at the door of the house."

St Francis de Sales now would perhaps have rung the bells and had the bread brought into Chapter: he saw no crime in humour. But he would have said: "See, brethren, how Providence spoils us. It has willed, for once, that our dear brother baker, usually so careful, should mistake the amount of flour. I hope he will not do it again. To punish him, and us with him, let him make tomorrow's supply blacker than coal. Meanwhile, since God in His goodness sends us this feast, we shall certainly not turn up our noses at it: and that our feast may be the more joyous, we shall invite our poor."

But back to de Rancé: "The venerable abbot of Châtillon who had resigned from his abbacy to come to La Trappe and who was over eighty, going up to the dormitory, was met by a monk carrying a candle. This monk, knowing that the old man's sight was not very good, wished to light him on his way, but the abbot of Châtillon, thinking that no special regard should be paid to himself, made a sign of refusal by way of thanks, which was perceived by the Father Abbot. Next day he came to Chapter, where, contrary to custom, he caused the novices to remain; then he assailed the abbot of Châtillon in some such words as these: 'Is it possible, that you, who have been an abbot for twenty-five years, who have had to teach your brethren the rule of St Bernard both by example and by precept, do not yet know that one of the principal points of this rule is to render service to one's brethren and receive service from them . . . What! one of your brethren wishes to render you a service and . . . you make a sign that you do not wish it . . . at your age? . . . I have made the novices remain to warn them that they must be careful not to follow an example so likely to destroy all that we have tried to build up. . . . Go, Father, you did ill to leave your monastery to set us such examples; you are not worthy [to be one of our band]. . . . I recommend you to the prayers of the community, and to bring them still more to accord you their prayers, you will remain on your knees at the door of the church when the monks enter, upon their return from the refectory."

"It was in this manner that our abbot imitated the conduct of the great abbots of the earliest ages . . ." and formed the judgment of his monks, teaching them in this instance to crush down pitilessly—and on the most futile pretext—

one of our most sacred sentiments—the respect due to old age.

"I am severe in Chapter," he wrote one day, "because it is the place in which faults must be corrected, but my severity ceases there and goes no further." Presumably he believes it, since he says it.

But he was of those—not who pardon themselves all things—but who quite sincerely see in themselves practically nothing that needs pardon. The plain truth is, of course, that he could not see the shadow of a breach of rule without leaping instantly to repress it—and not by signs alone. "Outside Chapter," writes Dubois, "the abbé de Rancé was not less careful to rebuke and to mortify those who seemed to him to have need of humiliation. He sometimes stopped the reading to reproach some for eating too greedily, others for not being tidy. Perceiving a brother who, during the meal, held his head too low over the basin, he ordered him from the table and sent him to take his food with the beasts whose unmortified appetites he accused him of sharing."

Jacqueline de Blémur, a nun who knew and loved the letter of the Benedictine Rule no less than Rancé and possessed its spirit far more, relates of Mère Antoinette d'Orléans that when she "wished to rebuke one who had merited correction, she imitated the Prophet who stretched himself upon the child, closed the door of the room, prayed much and warmed him with his breath. She studied the fitting time, never acting in haste: she waited till the spirit was at peace, spoke to it in secret. . . ." It would have been waste of time to show this picture to Rancé as a model: quite simply he would have seen his own features in it.

So he was even more surprised than irritated when some of his more devoted friends reached the point—of course with the uttermost circumspectness—of criticising these strange practices: as the abbé Le Roi discovered, when he committed the crime of uttering a few gently-worded observations on the point. Rancé replied roundly: it was his first duel with the pen; not by any means his last. "Une admirable réponse, d'une vigueur mâle et d'une austère beauté," cries Sainte-Beuve, who has described the battle in detail in Volume IV of the *Port-Royal.*

It *is* very fine: as I think, perhaps the best of his books, but already—this first essay—unusually violent, a cause of scandal. It contains that thrice formidable phrase:

"In truth you overturn Sinai from top to bottom, you ravage all the sanctity of the Thebaïd, you cause more disorders in Nitria and in Scete by four strokes of the pen than the Barbarians by all their incursions."

A clear proof—if proof is still needed—that it is not always a very long step that separates the sublime from the ridiculous.

"I have not been altogether edified by his manner of maintaining his cause," wrote the prudent Fléchier. "His zeal has a degree of heat beyond what is necessary, and I would have desired, if I may presume to say so, more gentleness in a solitary of his virtue and reputation."

Bossuet came in on his side, a little shocked to see "so holy a man" so far forget himself, yet attracted by the sublime! So he pointed out to M. Le Roi—as Sainte-Beuve neatly phrases it—"That he would be wrong even to seem to be right against a man like Rancé."

In one thing there is a certain piquancy, the more that this thing never re-appears: not only was Rancé's con-

stitutional irritability stirred by Le Roi's criticism; his conscience was troubled too. "It is to be feared," he had been told, "that the superior, wishing to produce the appearance of indignation and wrath, may find himself really enraged." Or in other terms: these tempests of yours, which you say and believe are altogether feigned—is there not some danger that they may turn imperceptibly into real tempests, and so be bad, not only or even mainly for the stricken victim, but even more for the hurler of the thunderbolt? The reasoning was sound: and little as Rancé was given to taking his own temperature, he could not but admit that flesh and blood sometimes had their part in his explosions. Very well, he said: be it so: yet I cannot escape my duty as an abbot, the duty of making scenes:

"'Those who listen,' says St Augustine, 'are more fortunate than those who speak and instruct.' The former are humble, the others have much difficulty in keeping themselves from pride. Hence it follows that the condition of a man who is in authority over others and has to censure and humiliate them, is much to be pitied: yet must he not therefore abandon what he sees useful or necessary to their sanctification. It may happen that a man will exercise his own passions in correcting those of his brethren; in rebuking in them the least movements of temper, he may follow the impetuosity of his own, and zeal for justice may grow irritable and become bitterness meriting condemnation. These things are perils; but you know that the true pastor must do no less than endanger his soul for the preservation of those whom he leads, and risk his salvation for that of his brethren."

It would be a waste of time to sort out this tangle of

pathetic sophisms. It is obvious that no monastic rule can impose on the superior the duty—I do not say of damning his soul for the community, like Père Gaucher of turbulent memory—but even of committing for the greater good of his brethren a single fault, however slight, against the essential virtue of charity. And "censure" and "humiliate" need not mean censure and humiliate in the bitter and tempestuous fashion we have seen.

"Do you think," he says to Le Roi, "that a superior is acquitted of his duty in this regard, by using the formula you give, or that a religious is deeply humiliated when one has said to him, as you prescribe, in a tone with no trace of salt and a colourless manner: 'Go my brother into the church: prostrate yourself and become as nothing before God'?"

No, no! there must be something sharp and biting, salt and pepper, stinging, lashing reprimands tearing the skin: failing that, the virtue of the monks would be less tried than that of the world, their lives easier and their salvation more doubtful. For after all only the humble will enter heaven: and how can a man be humble if no one humbles him! It is true that people in the world have no abbot to cover them with confusion; but God has provided. To those whom He wills to sanctify, the world itself serves as Chapter. But we, monks, having no converse save with the angels—if the Father Abbot does not do us this indispensable service, who will?

You think I am playing the fool? Not *I*: Listen:

"Monasteries are shelters and havens. As men in them are separated from all intercourse . . . with people in the world, they cannot be exposed to the accidents which happen to such people. . . . The very separation one from another,

which they preserve by the exactitude of their silence, *prevents even the slightest emotions and brings it about that their tranquillity is never troubled.*

"*They have therefore nothing to suffer*, neither from the world nor from their brethren, with whom, as St. Basil says, they preserve a perfect understanding. From whichever side you look upon them, you will find them equally exempt from contradictions, and nought is presented to them which can cause them the least trouble. Thus their condition would be very unfortunate if a superior, in the charity of his disposition, did not apply himself particularly to procure for them, by all the ways of mortification and humiliation he judges most useful and most suitable, what God brings about in people in the world by the diverse circumstances we have just mentioned."

"Unfortunate" monk: none "of the instruments God uses . . . to humiliate" other Christians has any power to reach him: no swindler to cheat him, no envious neighbour to seek his harm; no false friend to betray him; no policeman to hunt him down; no judge to deny him justice; no wife to persecute him by night and by day. All roads to heaven are closed! But no—he has his abbot—the complete tormentor, heaven-sent.

"Monasteries," continues this God-like man, "are schools of humility where the monks are crushed as grapes in a wine-press"—and treading the press, with pitiless, unwearying feet, is the Father Abbot. Without him, the abbey might be a Thelema after Rabelais's heart: with him, thanks be to God, it is a convict-prison.

Seduced by his lofty airs of virtue and by the imperturbable majesty of his style, Sainte-Beuve can find no words to celebrate so great a master of sanctity. Certainly he

did not understand whither tended the burning metaphors of those pages: "overturn the mount of the Beatitudes," "ravage" the Thebaïd, cause "more disorder" in all convents "by four strokes of the pen than the Barbarians by all their incursions." But here again we must not take him too seriously nor refute him as one would a philosopher, however extravagant, who understood his own system. This inconceivable theory of spiritual government, constructed in all its parts in a flash of time under the whip of temper, was for Rancé only a sort of club. Tempests are not given to reflection or reasoning. His abbatial rages had been criticised: his one duty therefore was first to avenge them, then to canonise them; to stun, blind, trample down the imprudent and too presumptuous critic. Even his private letters man-handle the wretched man: "There are no evil tricks that I do not expect from the personage who has done this to me," writes Rancé to Bossuet. "The action is so black that I will not dare to describe it in the terms it deserves." Now would you call that the style of—I will not say a saint—but even a Christian in proper control? These three lines are a dazzling revelation of the state of mind of the man who wrote them and hundreds like them in fury. Did he think that abbots alone have no need of humility, or that he had sufficiently practised the virtue by violently humiliating his monks and his occasional critics?

No! not even that. The precise point of his error was that he never so much as stopped to pose himself such a case of conscience. His zeal was solely concerned—and madly concerned—to decide, and exaggerate, the duty of others, to harass them by way of helping them to do it, to smite them thunderously if they failed. That indeed is

one of the traditional qualities of the *dévot*, in the contemporary sense of the word; he was a *dévot*, a superior and magnificent *dévot*, the flower and almost the justification of the species, in general so little flower-like, so deeply in need of justification. From that quality flowed a perpetual agitation, which allowed him no time to enter into himself. In a little *apologia pro domo sua*, wherein he marked out the broad lines for his future panegyrics, under the title *Vigilance du Supérieur*, he writes: "As my purpose was to break all intercourse among our monks . . . I made myself responsible, so far as was possible, for all their needs, and I made a rule that wherever I might be, even in church, they should come to let me know even of the least matters, without fear of worrying me, that I might give the necessary orders. This practice ensured that no one was out of dependence, and that help"—that is to say rebuke—"was not delayed."

"Who could have believed it if he had not seen it with his own eyes," cries Dom Lenain. "This man who seemed to live only on suffering . . . as though his body was of diamond . . . or rather as if he had been a pure spirit, was always in action from morning to night. He writes, dictates letters—fifty a day—studies, listens to his monks, answers all their difficulties; guides eighty men . . .; orders all that concerns them, whether their interior or exterior needs. Now he goes to the infirmary, from the infirmary to the guests, from the guests to the cloister, and from the cloister to his brethren; now he visits the cells to see if each is occupied; now goes down to the choir to discover with what piety they celebrate divine office; and now returns to his room where some brother awaits him, but often he returns so wearied out that he can no

longer remain on his feet—yet hardly is he back when the visit of a guest forces him to start again. He does not discontinue his activities even in the time set apart for repose. He is to be seen between Matins and Prime making a tour of the monastery, or going to the lay-brothers' quarters, or passing through the dormitory to see if everyone is in bed. . . . In one word, he wished to see all and know all of what was happening in the house, and to be everywhere. . . ."

"I can say," he wrote at this time, "that not a glass of *ptisane* was given in the infirmary save by my orders."

Neither was a glass broken without the abbot "proclaiming" the offender. All eyes—all ears—the ideal patron-saint for our Boy Scouts.

Of one of his monks who had just died, he said in an exhortation in Chapter: "His countenance was marked by so great modesty that I never saw him give a glance wherein curiosity could have the least part. And though I have watched him closely and with much attention, I have never seen him look at anything save what he ought to look at—that is to say he looked always at the ground."

After the dew, the thunder:

"And I can tell you that there are those among you whom I never see without finding something to censure. I have even seen them, in circumstances which ought to have drawn tears from their eyes, permit themselves actually to laugh."

Note in passing that he spies rather than observes. Countless examples show that he did not know souls. Usually he stopped short at the outward actions of his monks, and of these outward actions, at such as an open character cannot always manage to repress—the *fou rire*

for example, that providential safety-valve, conceived by the Creator for the beneficial relaxation of seminarists and Trappists. At any rate you may credit him, if you like, with any quantity of zeal—and whether you like it or not, with any quantity of time wasted and energy frittered away.

In all he was an innovator, in spite of his appeal to primitive tradition, and he formed the most erroneous idea possible of the mission of an abbot. A superior who, without either Rancé's prestige or his excuses, yet modelled himself on him, would be an absolute scourge. After all, what was the *use* of all this buzzing, harassing omnipresence, this mania for knowing everything, for leaving nothing—not so much as a cooling-drink—to the discretion of inferiors!

As they venerated him, were proud of him and happy to let themselves be galvanised by him, they did not complain too loudly of always having him on their heels. But had he passed a little more time in his cell, the machine would still have run, what with the help of the Father Prior and the obvious goodwill of the monks. After all—the thing has been tried. La Trappe lost nothing of its fervour when Rancé's infirmities and the activities that he never ceased to create for himself in the world at large forcibly suspended that implacable vigilance.

Besides: surely it is obvious that in so "scattering" himself, if he thought he was fulfilling a duty, he also was seeking to escape from himself, grown more and more incapable of that solitude and silence which once he thought he loved but of which he soon wearied as he wearied of all things. This round of niggling activity, which he naïvely coloured with a pretence of virtue, held boredom at arm's length.

Among all these sallyings-forth, in the course of these over-full days, what did he manage to save of his interior life? The question is delicate, but I cannot shirk it. According to Dom Lenain, who is sometimes breathless from following the dizzy goings and comings of the abbot, "his soul was always deep down in the furnace of holy prayer and meditation on the Sacred Scriptures. Each day he gave three hours continuously to contemplation and when he could no longer work with his hands"—we have already spoken of his paralysis—"he passed the time on his knees before the Blessed Sacrament. Beyond that he often prayed in his room, where they sometimes came upon him his face all enkindled, his eyes bathed in tears and raised to heaven. . . ." So speaks this witness, exceptionally important, both because he lived long years in intimacy with Rancé and because he is no less honest than Tillemont. Yet at the risk of seeming almost indecently temerarious, I admit that I attach no more importance to these affirmations of a modern historian than to the fabulous stories of the Golden Legend.

Lenain is no liar. He has no desire to invent. But inevitably he superimposes two very different—perhaps contradictory—images: the Rancé of real life, the man he saw with the eyes of his body, and that other Rancé who appeared to the eyes of his heart. So legends are born. The second Rancé—the dream—bears much more resemblance to his biographer than to the Abbot himself. Lenain lends him his own deeply-recollected interior life and his own ceaseless prayer, only intensified and made more luminous. Then to complete his ideal construction, he has but to turn to the formula of the saint proper. Familiar as I am with this kind of literature, I could have

written in advance the passage we have just read, and written it word for word! It is the ritual outline, the stock-portrait which the hagiographers pass from hand to hand, the frame into which, somehow or other, they manage to squash and squeeze the most diverse characters. In each of these heroes must be realised the traditional and highly-romanticised description of the saint on his knees: prayer is their natural state: they suspend it only from necessity, they resume it the moment they can—strictly speaking, they *never* suspend it. Filled with zeal they are beyond the reach of distractions or *ennui*, always just about to go into an ecstasy or just emerging from one.

Listen further: "He never pronounced the august name of Mary without bowing his head, and perceiving one day that a religious had failed to do so, he rebuked him with such warmth that he made all the brethren tremble and finished his correction with the words: 'Oh! can you hear this holy name pronounced like an ordinary name! If you had seen a ray of the brightness which surrounds the Queen of Angels, you would be seized at once with reverence and with fear; and I think that your soul could not support that brightness without separating from its body!' During all this discourse his face seemed to shine. Which made them think that he was even then receiving some special favour from the Mother of Pure Love."

Thus one vision of the Blessed Virgin caused this hallowed fury of which we hear the thunder-claps, and this very fury culminated in another vision, Our Lady knowing no other way of rewarding her stormy cavalier.

Yet among the stock-phrases of Lenain's *cantilena*, there is one apparently precise statement of fact. Each day, he says, Rancé gave three long hours on end to contemplation.

But the statement is an act of faith pure and simple. For after all, he was not there. Again, where in the busy life that we have seen, *could* Rancé find those three hours? Another witness, no less honest than Lenain, no less zealous for the glory of the Abbot of La Trappe, our friend Dom Gervaise, has blown heavily upon those three hours, in the book in which he criticises Rancé's early biographers. He writes that on the eve of Rancé's departure for Rome, Marsollier "describes him as doing two things: first"—and this is the only one that concerns us here—"he makes him spend several hours in prayer commending his journey to God. I do not know how he missed saying that he spent the night in prayer. If he had known M. de Rancé, he would have known that the vivacity of his mind and imagination never permitted him to say such long prayers and that, on his own admission, he could never prolong prayer beyond a half-hour."

That, without any shadow of doubt, is the truth. Gervaise accepts it without embarrassment, and in this appears both less simple than Lenain and more instructed in spiritual things. In fact the true merit of the saints and their continuous ascent towards perfection are not measured by the length of their spiritual exercises. Their prayer is judged, not by the ease they find in it but by the effect, at first not perceptible, which it works in them and which, little by little, without extinguishing the ardour of their impulses, brings peace to the deep places of their soul.

There precisely is the thing which debars us from comparing the interior life of Rancé with that of the true saints. In him we see no trace of that constant and unendingly progressive metamorphosis at which we marvel in the inner history of a Philip Neri—as independent as Rancé—

or of a Jane Chantal, as impetuous—or of a Vincent de Paul, no less active and overburdened. From Véretz to Rome, from Rome to La Trappe, from manhood to old age, we never feel that he rises above himself: if anything he sinks—though this may be no more than appearance. The natural fruits of a life of prayer—charity, humility, peace—may have grown to maturity in him in that secret zone known to God only. But as for the Rancé of history, who alone concerns us, neither his gestures nor his ideals show him growing ever less stormy, ever less imperious, scornful, violent, intractable.

His ceaseless struggles against the enemies of the Reform and in general against "the iniquity of man," were not calculated to moderate his effervescence. Beaten at the Chapter of Cîteaux, when after a short visit to Paris he fell back upon La Trappe, he wrote to his bishop, Séez: "I confess that I have come from Paris resolved never to return, confirmed in all my disgust . . . (and) in the constant resolution to break all intercourse with the world, to hide myself for ever. I am going, if it please God, to carry out to the letter these words of the Prophet: *Vade . . . ingredere in cubicula tua; claude ostia tua super te. . . .* That is to say, Monseigneur, that I am going to bury myself alive in a sepulchre and await in repose and in silence the approaching eternity of God, which is the only time in which we can hope to see the iniquity of man brought to end."

"Candidly," said Voltaire, "we French are not really eloquent." He had not read Rancé. Why then, wrote Rancé further, "will men never grow weary of talking of me, and why do they not leave me buried in the repose of my solitude?"—and he is quite serious, remember—"I

have never meddled with anything, I have neither spoken, nor written, nor preached, and our profound silence excites the envy of ill-formed minds."

Thus it is in spite of himself, and because the rage of his enemies constrains him to it, that he dashes down every morning into the lists. The biographers have simply swallowed this interpretation and have nearly succeeded in imposing it on us. "He was afflicted from all sides," writes Lenain; "his friends afflicted him by praise, which was a weariness to his humility; his enemies by continual calumnies and defamatory libels." Dubois writes in the same strain, seeing his hero always in the posture of one persecuted. I admit that at first I was completely caught by this pathetic theme. Yet I could not but ask why and whence were loosed so many hatreds against a great silent monk, whose only offence was the practice, far from the world and with a hundred or so monks silent as himself, of the primitive rule of St Bernard. At that date there was no freemasonry to explain everything! That those delicate souls who are convinced that a good man shuns publicity should have found Rancé a problem, is conceivable enough. They had then—and since, in every generation of Frenchmen—their national storm-centre. Two were too many. The Abbot of La Trappe, they said, could surely be silent—at any rate till the death of M. Arnauld. But these things are a mere jest. Other saints are not ordinarily troubled because of such trifles. In addition, Rancé, formidable enough by himself, had on his side practically all the powers of the day, including the Jansenists. We see and hear much, too much, of the martyr. Where are the executioners? In despair of finding them, I came to believe that the persecution was only a myth: it all comes down,

as far at any rate as we can judge from the documents, to anonymous letters, two or three pamphlets, a few songs.

> Etre moine sans dépendance,
> Et solitaire sans silence . . .
> Déclamer contre la science
> Et secrètement dans les bois
> S'étudier à l'éloquence . . .

It amounts to very little. We can leave the anonymous letters, the insignificant work of a few deserters from La Trappe, which never moved anyone but Rancé. As to the pamphlets—rather late, by the way, to be the cause of the trouble, since they only appeared by way of reply to the provocations of his *De la Sainteté et des Devoirs monastiques*—they never threatened serious danger either to him or to La Trappe. The *grand siècle* was vaccinated against this particular poison. As the newspapers were reduced to their proper place, there was a rain of pamphlets from everywhere, against everybody. Bossuet had worse. Yet it was not pamphlets that troubled Rancé most. He could deal with them quickly enough. Their very outrageousness made them harmless. Verbal attacks pricked him deeper. He foresaw them, guessed at them, named them, so to speak, before their birth.

One by one he reckons the hostile centres: Saint-Germain-des-Près, as well as Cîteaux, ranked bristling against this man whose very life, without any words of his, is a denunciation of their laxity; with them the Jesuits, the blackest of his *bêtes noires*. Not one but is plotting to strangle him: a universal conspiracy. He would have liked two hundred pairs of ears to lose nothing of the evil they spoke of him in chorus. Everything repeated to him, true, false, absurd, he accepted, brooded over; and God

knows that his informants were active enough. Yet these evil tongues did him a service. If they had been silent, would he not have had to be silent too? Between him and them, how are we to judge? We know neither the occasion, the form nor the tone of the remarks carried back to him. We may be certain that he exaggerated at pleasure both their malice and their importance. But he had few friends in *that* world and it was not likely that he would lack critics. If *that* is what he called persecution, we are all as much persecuted as he. If he had done no more than reply to the provocations of his enemies, we should leave the saints to remind him of the maxims of the Gospel. We should have thought it, if not saintly, at any rate not unnatural had he returned blow for blow. But no! Stones, sticks, grenades—the first blow was always from him. He was that new thing in martyrs—one who always began the offensive.

This point is of capital importance and the facts prove it true. Yet neither the startling facts, nor the conclusion they force on the historian, show us the true Rancé. It has always to be remembered that of this perpetual commotion in which any other man's interior life would have been submerged, Rancé was never really aware. There you have the very heart of his weakness and in the fullest sense of the word his excuse. For after all, in the moral order, one's acts are what one *means*—and Rancé after his conversion meant nothing but good, the greatest good: and had the good fortune—perhaps—not to know, or better, not even to catch a fragmentary glimpse of the formal character, so to speak, and the objective significance of his actions. He wrote in perfect good faith: "God has given me so great an indifference for all that concerns myself

that I am always the last to learn news of that sort." And again: "News never reaches me."

It is enough to leave us gaping with bewilderment—since we have seen the telegraph and telephone, as it were, of La Trappe connected up with the four corners of the horizon: and we have simply abandoned the effort to number the letters and visits he joyed to receive. He did not read many newspapers but he had his living news-sheet—the abbé Nicaise. Saint-Simon kept him informed of the gossip of the court, and entrusted him with the first manuscripts of his *Mémoires*; his other agents gave him the gossip of the Church.

The apartment of M. Maine, his too indispensable secretary, was practically an Information Bureau. One day Rancé wrote to Nicaise: "It is true, Monsieur, that I am ill informed of what happens in the world and that unless something reaches me by chance, no one can be more ignorant than I. I am usually the last to learn even those things which concern myself." To the same Nicaise he wrote soon after: "I have spoken [of what happens in the convents] as a man informed for a long time past by the accounts which have come to me and still come every day from all over the kingdom."

And indeed, as we learn from other passages, he kept close watch on many convents, both of men and of women, by means of chosen intermediaries—you notice how carefully I avoid the proper word. This Prefect of the Monastic Police was always on the watch for the daily weaknesses—and still more, of course, for the real scandals. Yet it was neither from mere curiosity nor mere malice. It enabled him to document his controversial books, and the secret information he accumulated helped him in his private

handling of this or that superior whom he might need to reduce. After the exodus of several Celestines to La Trappe —seven in a few weeks—when the General of the order refused to give them the necessary authorisations, Rancé wrote him: "If you force us despite ourselves to justify what your brethren and we have done, *things will be said* which I have learnt with grief and which will let the whole world know the obligation resting upon them to leave you and upon us to receive them." Here again I must avoid the proper word. But what would he not have done had he been better informed of what was happening in the world? What! he cried one day, will we never convince monks "that their glory is to be hidden and not to mix in anything, and their shame to be seen and to mix in affairs." But what is the use? He simply never saw these flagrant contradictions. "The things of the past," he said, "are in my regard as if they had never been. . . . There are circumstances in my life of which the memory is effaced in the very moment of their happening." He meant here to refer to the evil done to him, of which no trace remained in his memory: but this rare power of forgetting buried no less quickly the evil he did. Thus he generously pardoned himself the excesses of his polemical writings—or rather he pardoned the victims of these excesses. "In all this, charity has received no wound from me," he affirmed after his writings against Saint-Maur. "At bottom I had no desire to hurt anyone . . . I did what I could to preserve the rules of just moderation. It seems to me that not one biting word has escaped me."

Canon Legendre, a sound judge, does not agree with him. He saw no difference between Rancé and the elder Arnauld. "In their polemical works," he says, "there

reigns predominant a bitterness, a superiority, a pungency far removed from the gentleness and humility so much recommended by our Saviour."

But once again, he bears no grudge against his victims. "There is nothing that the envy and malignity of men have not vomited against me. Yet I have not therefrom a moment of ill-humour, nor of chagrin against those who have poured them forth." "God, Whom alone we regard, will give us the patience we need to be able to love those who hate us." These insults which he speaks of as being poured out upon him never really hurt him, at most only grazed the skin. His patience was not at the mercy of such men: "If they are waiting to cease their writing until what they say causes me pain and wears out my patience, they have far to go, for so far God has given me great peace." There you have the whole man, sublime in his impertinence, yet less dazzling when he attributes this impertinence to a grace from heaven: for here there was no miracle but only one of nature's marvels—the abbé de Rancé himself. The closer we press him, the more impossible it is to fit him into any ready-made category, moral or psychological. That soul is unfathomable not because it is too deep, but because there is no depth—only a surface. The true ego is as far away when he storms as when he prays. If words have any meaning, Rancé is not humble: yet still less, if possible, is he proud. This hero of silence never stops talking: this hero of solitude never even feels the need for recollection. Happy we that we have only to write his life! If we *had* to judge him, less simple-minded than his panegyrists but marvelling more, we might almost be tempted to say he was without sin!

## Chapter VI

# THE ASSAULT ON THE JESUITS— THEN ON THE JANSENISTS

Even saints have no right to anything but the truth. As long as we rely upon incontestable facts and authentic documents, we need ask no pardon for the judgments we have freely arrived at on our hero: the less so that the Catholic instinct has always—vaguely perhaps and diffidently—felt that the Abbot of La Trappe was not a Saint as other men were Saints. You have this feeling, to quote a strong instance, in the "ultramontane" circles of the nineteenth century—at Solesmes, for example. In the quivering admiration, even semi-adoration, that Rancé did not fail to inspire, there was yet a note of constraint, a sort of invincible uncertainty. To see that this is not mere fancy on my part, one need read no more than the two volumes of the abbé Dubois. Scarcely a page in it but bears the scent of the advocate: yet the jury he is trying to win round is not a group of unbelievers. There is about it a tone, an urgency, even a certain tight-reined fierceness, or at any rate a ceaseless vigilance, not usually met in works of this sort. My sole originality, if originality it be, is to have analysed more carefully and with greater freedom than any before me, this faintly disturbing mixture of enthusiasm and unease.

Yet I am not the first. Before I was born, Varin, librarian of the Arsenal, outlined, in the *Vérité sur les Arnauld*,

the true silhouette of Rancé—this in 1847, three years after Chateaubriand's book. In the *Etudes Religieuses* (1878) Père le Lasseur, a very learned Jesuit, submitted the Abbot of La Trappe and his biography to a more than severe criticism, from which Dubois emerges in tatters, and Rancé somewhat damaged. Père le Lasseur was the very man for the job. He it was who riddled with short, malicious—occasionally unjust—notes the *Mémoires* of Rapin. Yet it seems certain that the redoubtable Jesuit did no more in this case than lend his name and the authority of his *Revue* —to whom? to a Trappist—d'Aiguebelle, I think—who wrote, as we also know, in perfect accord with his abbot. In the mind of all three—the Jesuit, the monk and the abbot—these articles, *L'abbé de Rancé et le jansénisme*, demanded a sequel. In matters of this sort the first step is the hardest. But certain powers must have intervened and the campaign ended there.

It may have been better so. History is patient. And neither as a whole nor in their details can these articles be discussed seriously. The principal direction is not sure. They are working on the wrong clue—to wit the note of Jansenism that they would not have been sorry to attach to the abbot's name. Rancé signed the formulary and was very far from ever retracting his signature. He cannot therefore be called a Jansenist in the theological sense of the word. I know, of course that, after all, the impalpable reality which the word serves to designate belongs far more to a state of mind than to a doctrine: the "five propositions", as Joseph de Maistre put it, are the least of Jansenism's sins. Further, it is a party. Of the state of mind, Rancé bears the imprint, and this more deeply than many notorious, or perhaps we should say "official",

Jansenists. As to his relations with the *party*, only a fool could miss seeing how close they were. But on the doctrine concerned, no one has any right to dispute his formal orthodoxy. To be a Jansenist, it is not enough to be jansenistical. And Rancé had his own way even of being jansenistical: for on the one hand he made his own the congenital furies of the party against the Jesuits, and on the other he assailed the same party with a repeated and utterly futile cruelty which must have revolted the Jesuits themselves. To the Jansenists he seems to have said what the Latin poet said to his exasperating but fascinating mistress—*Nec tecum possum vivere, nec sine te.*

In nature are all tastes. So also, it would seem, in supernature: Rancé never liked Jesuits. Whether or not the Jesuits repaid him in kind, the abbé began it. Well before the death of Mme de Montbazon, the "Casuists"—in plain words the Jesuits—filled him with pious disgust. His conversion, far from bringing him to more charitable or even more discriminating judgments, only inflamed him more. Before his conversion and after, there was no difference in his two attitudes towards them, save that, after, his high prestige as a Reformer added immensely to the weight of his blows.

To claim with Dubois that in 1684 "the abbé de Rancé had never had any quarrel with the Fathers of this Society, so useful to the Church," and that he had "always loved and esteemed them," is to take us all for fools. There were strong words spoken before Mme de Montbazon's death: strong words spoken, and soon written, after. Even before the pen came into action, the Jesuits of the day could not be deceived as to the sentiments he professed towards them. "No one," writes Père d'Avrigny in his

*Mémoires*, " maltreated the Casuists more, and judging from appearances, no one had read them less,"—quite so! Rancé knew them only in Pascal. " To attribute to the laxity of these authors, as he does in his letter to the Maréchal de Bellefonds, the moral perversion of the majority of those who went to throw themselves into his arms, is a pitiful illusion of which we may well be astonished that as fine a mind as his should be capable."

If then their friendship for the abbé went no further than wishing him in heaven, it is not hard to see the reason for this slight want of tenderness. Rancé of course did not see it like that. If the Jesuits were his determined enemies, he thought, and said, that it was solely because his own sanctity not only eclipsed them *but judged them!* We may overlook this absurd explanation as we overlook so much more, but we do not understand how his panegyrists could have countersigned it so heavily.

" The Molinists," Dubois has the nerve to write, " so easy in moral teaching, so little exigent in the matter of penance, so accommodating towards hardened sinners of every sort, seeing themselves judged and condemned before the world by La Trappe, where sinners were reconciled with God only at the expense of prodigious expiations, deliberately set about taking away all authority and all prestige from such an example."

And again:

" Humiliated by the severity of his doctrine . . . the Molinists had always regarded the abbé de Rancé as one of their most confirmed enemies . . . and they had fallen upon him, at every chance, to rend him."

So—two complaints: they tore the poor abbot to pieces: they tore him to pieces as revenge for his virtue.

Of these complaints the second is of its own nature outside criticism: it is a matter of insinuation, malevolent speech and as it seems to me pure calumny. But even as to the first—is it proved that they assailed him more cruelly than he had first assailed them? "The Molinists," writes Dubois further, "who had never been able to endure the reputation of his house any more than the severity of his maxims . . . spread a thousand false rumours against his faith and attacked his person without measure and without scruple." While Rancé himself says: "There is no sort of calumny with which they have not tried to ruin my reputation."

What grounds had he for saying so? He had not in his hands a single paper to justify so grave an accusation. None of the pamphlets issued against him are from the Jesuits. It all comes down to remarks carried back to him —we know not by whom—and we can neither check the accuracy of the tale-bearers nor judge the malice of the tales. As I have said, Rancé had no objection to listening at keyholes. We know he had spies everywhere. We know that his imagination lost all measure once his vanity was in question. In his reply to the *Timocrate* he himself admits (writing with the hand of his faithful Maupeou) that "the Reverend Jesuit fathers, for the most part, did justice to this holy abbot;" which means that they canonised him in his lifetime! Among these faithful souls, Maupeou mentions in a note Père Bourdaloue. Later, at the time of the most dangerous crisis that ever threatened La Trappe—the dismissal of Dom Gervaise—Père de la Chaise had but to say the word to ruin the house: not only did he not say that word, but as we shall see, he set to work to extricate the abbot from his trouble. That, on the other hand, some Jesuits spoke of him without friendship—that they

vigorously criticised both the excesses of his ascetical teaching and the ceaseless clatter of his manifestos—we do not doubt, though there happen to be no proofs extant of these inevitable reactions. Considering that Rancé was too much for the patience of the Benedictine Mabillon and the General of the Carthusians, can you expect that the Jesuits—much worse maltreated by him than either of these—should always and unanimously have turned the other cheek? And if you think that in assailing them Rancé had no other object than the greater glory of God—which is not literally impossible!—why deny his adversaries the benefit of the same excuse?

But as to what they are supposed to have done to him, we have, for the most part, only conjectures. We know they tried to prove him a Jansenist. The Jesuits, writes Canon Legendre, "lost no occasion of criticising him and doing him disservice . . . convinced as they were that the house of La Trappe was a Jansenist nest."

But they were not alone in thinking and saying that La Trappe was no great distance from Port-Royal. That was the general impression—and naturally the real Jansenists did nothing to contradict it. The few reproaches they had for him were kept for their small circle of initiates, and not communicated to him save by private information: in public they professed the most unalloyed admiration, all the more ostentatiously because they had so much to gain from his support. His rigorism seemed a justification of themselves, who were in practice so much less austere than he. They wished him blessings without end, as a dove who had escaped the claws of the Jesuit vulture: for they were sure that in his inviolable dove-cot he would not mingle his voice with the songs of Babylon.

The party, skilled to recognise its own, did not at first excommunicate everyone who signed the formulary. It could pardon an enormous amount to one who was helping to bring about, by devious ways yet sure, the ultimate triumph of the true disciples of St Augustine. The more the Jansenists praised Rancé, says Legendre, "the more men thought he was of their opinion, not only because they reserved their praises for their friends, but also because the abbot, for his part, did not spare the Jesuits, making it his boast that he did not think with them on the subject of grace, complaining of them with bitterness as calumniators."

In truth the abbot was in a false and highly painful situation. "The worst perplexity," he said one day, "is to find oneself between one's friends and one's conscience." The formula has the ring of high tragedy but it does not cover the whole situation: to the voice of his conscience were added the loud murmurings of self-interest. It was for him a question of life and death. If Louis XIV thought him definitely a Jansenist, La Trappe was ruined. It was a nightmare from which he could never shake free. His problem would have been bad enough if he had only had *one* duty: but he had two, and they were in conflict—to save La Trappe and to beat the Jesuits. He hesitated, dodged about, faced both ways, did his best with these contradictory "obligations," always impetuous and theatrical even in his best laid schemes. Let us follow with patient sympathy the chief stages of this struggle which poisoned his whole career as a reformer, particularly the last years of his life.

In the early days of the Reform there was a touch of coolness between him and his one-time friends at Port-Royal. He avoided their advances perhaps a shade cavalierly.

Robert d'Andilly, who thought he had him, sulked and relapsed into silence. The abbé paid little attention, being absorbed in his quarrels with Cîteaux and in the organisation of his abbey. Besides, the party was in a sore pass. But when in 1668 the rainbow of the peace of Pope Clement appeared in the sky, both of them hastened to draw tighter the slackened bonds. D'Andilly made the first advances; he opened his arms and the abbé flung himself upon his breast. It was a most touching honeymoon; and forthwith the silence of La Trappe was open to the broken men, young and old, of Jansenism. Dom Lenain left Saint-Victor to escape signing the formulary—he was Rancé's sub-prior for more than thirty years; then the canon theologian of Aleth, Paul Hardy; Claude Cordin, a noted doctor of the Sorbonne; the Celestine Dom Augustin—worthy souls all of them, whom the sight of that paper to sign had plunged into despair. On their arrival at La Trappe they declared explicitly, as the reliable Tillemont tells us, "that they came to embrace a life of penance . . . but that this was on condition that no one should ever mention signature to them": a declaration which "did not prevent the abbé from receiving them," to the scandal, the unnecessary scandal as it seems to me, of Père Le Lasseur, who thinks he should have demanded a formal retractation. My own opinion is that it was one of those obscure cases in which one need not be too rigid.

It was simply a question of fact—whether "the five propositions" were contained in Jansenius' book: and Rancé, though he was certain that they were, did not admit—nor did Bossuet either—the Church's right to demand of its members this conviction of the fact. Besides which these postulants, though priests, would henceforth

exercise no functions—parochial or magistral—and would be condemned on these points as on all others to eternal silence. In short, if the abbé here was guilty of an excess of mercy, I am persuaded that Francis de Sales would not have acted otherwise. Père Le Lasseur admits that this concession had no ill consequences, and that, thanks to the "meticulous precautions" of Rancé, La Trappe remained impermeable to all infiltrations of Jansenist doctrine.

But not to Jansenist visits, or presents. They came in a steady stream. Thus Quesnel in 1672, quickly followed in 1673 by the elder Arnauld in person, with his inseparable Nicole. With more leisure than Bossuet—or through greater love of solitude—these two spent a fortnight at La Trappe. When later he was reproached with having rung the knell of Arnauld to a somewhat dismal air, Rancé cried out: "What had we in common: what contact: what relation!" He had forgotten not only this two weeks' pilgrimage but even the intimate letters he had received from the Doctor and, what was more serious, the not less intimate, probably more compromising letters he had written back. As for gifts, they were as continuous as the presses of Port-Royal. Everything that came from those presses took the road to the "desert", and at each new work the abbé asked with amazement if ever "anything had appeared in the Church from which it could draw more utility and succour for the conduct and sanctification of souls." "One might have said," remarks Dubois, "that at this moment the Jansenist order of the day along their whole line was to win Rancé." Our untiring advocate wishes us to infer from that, that this conquest was still to win. But if Rancé was not in fact on their side, why did he *look* as if he were? What need was there to receive them

with open arms, to write them so often? What comedy do you think he was playing? Besides, what harm? They were not bad men. The essential orthodoxy of the abbé was well known to them; he waved high enough the white plume of his "signature". And if, behind closed doors, he joined with them in a little light comment on the good Jesuit fathers, *was* it so great a crime?

For my part had I lived then, I would not have had the least scruple about cultivating the acquaintance of many of these ladies and gentlemen; not the great Arnauld, of course, who must have been a terrible bore, nor that mealy-mouthed fanatic de Quesnel; but Mère Agnes, M. Hamon, Tillemont, the delightful Nicole—with whom, besides, I should have met Racine!

In addition to professed Jansenists, his best friends "jansenised" gaily: in the episcopate, Le Camus, Choiseul, Gondrin, Henri Arnauld and—why not say it openly?—Bossuet: of the laity, Tréville and the comte du Charmel, one of his closest friends. Of all who in any sense frequented La Trappe, there was not one on the other side. There was no crime in that: we like and dislike whom we will. On the contrary I greatly admire his letter to the duchesse de Guise, who had advised him to throw overboard a compromising friend, the famous Tréville.

"Has your Royal Highness thought upon it? And would you have me break on mere suspicion with a friend who, being full, as he is, of virtue and probity, will always attract the esteem and friendship of those who know him? —I might easily pass my whole life without finding again what I had lost. . . . God guard me, Madame, from a weakness I have observed and condemned all my life, that of keeping neither faith nor word and of making no scruple

of violating all the laws of friendship whenever passion, interest, favour or false zeal so urge."

Well, well! Let us hope that this pride may never abdicate. Upon the details of the events we are about to set down, we shall allow Père Le Lasseur and his Trappist friend to speak. I might wish that both of them were a shade less fierce in their comments. But here as always Rancé is his own most cruel enemy. Why did he not add to his other vows a vow never to write?

A growing rumour named him Jansenist. To explain this "it is not necessary, with M. Dubois, to have recourse to the jealousy of religious communities, to the laxity of the Molinists, to the true or supposed breaches of rule by the monks. The ceaseless going and coming of the Jansenists . . . the flattering letters of the abbé, whose correspondents did not feel bound to secrecy, were sufficient to inspire suspicion in the defenders of orthodoxy. A conversation with the duc de Brancas, in which Rancé it seems had taken up with some heat the defence of the sect, became public and gave more weight to the accusations. It was then that a long letter from the abbé was circulated . . . as an apologia."

The letter, written in 1676, was of course a manifesto, and intended by its author for the whole of France.

What wrong had he done? Was it *his* place to condemn? "It was impossible that God should demand either from you or from me an account of what we have abstained from judging, since for that we have neither the character nor the obligation. I assure you, however, both because Jesus Christ declared that He would punish with eternal torment whoever should give his brother even a slight insult, and because I regard myself as on the point of being judged

myself, *there is nothing further from me than to judge others.* . . . The safest way is to remain in submission. It is the means of drawing upon myself all parties and of pleasing no one. But provided I please God . . . I trouble myself little in what manner men may explain my conduct."

Unfortunately the letter did not stop there. The poor Jesuits had no right to the benefit of that charity which he invokes so eloquently on behalf of the Jansenists.

"To speak candidly, I am nothing less than I am a Molinist . . . and I am persuaded that the Jansenists have no evil doctrines. . . . The moral teaching of most [of the Jesuits] is so corrupt, their rules so opposed to the sanctity of the Gospel . . . that there is almost nothing I could suffer less than to see my name used to support opinions which I condemn in the fullness of my heart. What surprises me is that on this head everyone is dumb, and that those even who make profession of zeal and piety maintain a profound silence, as though there were anything more important in the Church than to preserve purity of faith in the conduct of souls and the direction of characters."

"There is nothing," he had said a few lines earlier, "further from me than to judge others." What *would* he be like if he started judging!

"Jansenism alone seemed to have any right to his charity," cried Varin. But his line of thought is clear. The Jansenists have no evil doctrine, and the Church persecutes them; the Jesuits destroy the Gospel and the Church leaves them in peace. But back to Le Lasseur:

"But what was the source of this vigorous hatred for the moral theology of the confrères of Bourdaloue? Is it only the cry of an honourable soul?—We should like to think so. Why *must* this austere moralist give us reason

to doubt it, by mingling with his indictment the recriminations of personal rancour? 'I know from my own experience and I feel every day how far their injustice and their violence extend. There is no sort of calumny wherewith they do not try to blacken my reputation. . . . As they cannot attack my morals, they attack my faith and my belief, and find in the rules of their moral theology . . . that it is permissible to say against me every evil thing that envy and passion can suggest to them.' "

"In writing these lines, was the abbot of La Trappe thinking of the punishments which Christ threatens to whoever 'gives his brother even a slight insult'? Probably he had forgotten that he was 'on the point of being judged' himself when he added: 'My conduct is not conformed to theirs. My rules are strict, theirs are lax. The ways in which I strive to walk are narrow, those which they follow are broad and spacious. That is my crime; it is enough: I must be crushed and destroyed.' And he ends his parallel with these words from the book of Wisdom: '*Let us oppress the poor just man. . . . He is grievous unto us even to behold: for his life is not like other men's and his ways are very different.*'

"In truth one would be tempted to say, with M. Varin: 'To this passage from the Old Testament, Rancé could have added one from the New: *My God, I give thee thanks that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers as also is this publican. I fast twice in the week.*' And we understand the reticence of the panegyrist [Dubois] who has omitted this section of the letter to the duc de Brancas."

Dubois, by the way, is even more amusing than usual at this point: "Rancé," he writes, "is very far from . . . holding out his hand to the Jansenists, from making common

cause with them, and still less with the Molinists. From the depth of his desert he sees the parties as from a peaceful bay, tossed by their wretched passions, and he has no other part in it than to pray and weep." His weeping you have just seen. And Dubois adds: "The conduct of the abbé de Rancé in these circumstances was that of Bossuet, his friend."

"This inexorable rigour against the Molinists, in contrast with the indulgence with which the Jansenists were treated by the abbot of La Trappe, was not calculated to diminish suspicions of his orthodoxy. The rumour spread at court that he was leaning towards the sect, but it did not dare to declare itself openly. A new explanation became necessary. He gave it in a letter to the Maréchal de Bellefonds,"—a letter which Bossuet undertook to have printed (1678).

Again it was a manifesto, but designedly more temperate. He was of no party; he never spoke of these lamentable quarrels; he confined himself to groaning "at the foot of the altar at seeing the breast and the womb of the church torn by her own children." He had signed the formulary; he had no opinion other than that of St Thomas: yet if he was not a Jansenist, it would be doing him a wrong to think him favourable to the Jesuits, who, indeed, seemed to him "no less dangerous" than the others, since they call good "that which is evil", entering "into easy compromises", putting "as the Prophet says, cushions beneath their elbows, instead of covering their heads with sackcloth and ashes."

Here again, you see, the Society of Jesus gets the lion's share of the letter. It is worth noticing, by the way, that the Jesuits could not have been so strong at that time, since Bossuet, and those of the court who presided with

him at the issue of this manifesto, not only unreservedly approved this virulent public attack on the enemies of Port-Royal—for that after all was their own affair—but did not even think it imprudent. However that may be, the abbé hoped that his letter might satisfy everyone and that after so decisive an explanation, he might be left to pray and groan in peace. Did we say earlier that he was always to remain twenty? Take away twelve.

"In spite of the consideration which the abbot of La Trappe had shown with regard to the Jansenists—it had been necessary this time—in order not to come full upon the reef he had grazed in the letter to the duc de Brancas—to make a slight side-shift and withdraw from his former friends by confounding them with his enemies under the common description of *parties* which were tearing the maternal bosom of the Church and with which he refused to associate. The Jansenists were deeply offended: several of them—but only subalterns—found vent for their ill-humour in insulting letters and pamphlets. The leaders" (or rather those who seemed to be leaders, for to my way of thinking they were more led by the party than the party by them) "maintained a prudent reserve, either because they more clearly saw the dilemma he was in and had not lost all hope, or because they feared to push him to an extremity. Arnauld himself, in a private letter, blamed Rancé for having issued his opinion, publicly and needlessly, 'on a matter no longer in issue, on which no one compelled him to speak,' but declared to those who were urging him to write against the abbé 'that he would never do so, because he loved and honoured the man of God in him too much.' Nicole wrote that he would rather 'have his right arm cut off than write anything disadvantageous to

his person and his work.'" Le Lasseur thinks this a hypocritical stratagem: I do not agree. He was not an accomplice or a surety or a possible adversary whom they were anxious to humour: he was still a friend, and one who, for all his odd whims, remained to them "a man of God." From all this business these men seem to me to emerge with credit. To avenge themselves they had but to draw from their archives this or that confidential remark let fall by their correspondent. "If M. Arnauld," writes Larrière, "had consulted only his own interests and the interests of his friends, he could have forced the abbé de Rancé to explain himself more fully, by making public the letters in which was shown the esteem with which he was filled for these same persons for whom he pretended to blush."

M. Marcel, the Jansenist curé of Saint-Jacques, wrote long after to Rancé: "If we decided 'not to take up' your letter to the Maréchal de Bellefonds, you will remember that it was out of consideration for you and for the work of God that is in your hands. It was also this that made me suppress, in agreement with Mme de Longueville . . . that which I had received from you, a fortnight before, on the same subject but in a different style and tone." Thus you have two documents from the same hand and practically with the same date: the one intended for the public, the other for his intimate friends: in the one the Jansenists are rending the Church: they are nobly defending it in the other. Why this yes and no? asks Arnauld, and he replies with true nobility: "One sees it clearly enough and one would much rather not see it."

Yet this manifesto which ought, you would think, to have set fire at once to both powder-magazines, did, after the first shock, lead to a general lull. The Jesuits, who after

all had had a double ration of insults, were no more eager to pick up the gauntlet than the Jansenists. Both sides let the provocations pass. This rapid pacification calls for some explanation. It may have been that men saw at last that violence was not the surest means of bringing the Jansenist quarrel to an end: it may have been that wise men, without being in the least attached to the party, wished to see completed that settlement which the Clementine peace had so happily brought into sight. Besides, so great was Rancé's reputation for sanctity that he could allow himself many liberties with impunity; and whatever he may have said, the Jesuits as a body did him justice: better still they venerated him, along with the whole of France, as a sublime living protest against "the world." To lay a hand on this pillar of penance—and at a moment when the free-thinkers were gaining daily—was surely to shake the very temple. Soon we shall see the scruples of Mabillon, when he was forced, very reluctantly, to defend his order against the slanders of the saintly abbé.

And then there were certain tacit allowances made for him. All those tricks which the eulogists try to hush up when they cannot canonise them were seen by contemporaries much as they were. It was generally realised that Rancé's outbursts had no more substance in them than stage bombs. With his quick alternations from the great penitent to the *enfant terrible* and back again—they took seriously nothing but his virtue.

Yet with all that, it seems that the authorities were not satisfied this time to pass it over as just one more eccentricity. If he was spared a more mortifying correction, he was dealt with privately and inspired with a most salutary fear. Here we have a very curious, and very mysterious, chapter,

of which Rancé's biographers either have not seen or have not wished to see the extreme importance. With the aid of Le Lasseur, we shall try to reconstruct it.

"The Catholics," he tells us, "had been no more satisfied by the letter to the Maréchal de Bellefonds, which did not touch the essence," and which left more than a doubt hovering in the mind as to the writer's orthodoxy. "To obtain something clearer and more precise, they were diplomatic enough to have recourse to the intermediary of the Duchesse de Guise, who was filled with veneration of the abbé de Rancé and who was not regarded as a friend of the Casuists." Through the instrumentality of the Princess, the abbé, submitted to a quasi-judicial interrogation, could be forced to declare his true feelings. The questions and answers have been preserved, the questions very insistent, pressing hard, the answers rather pitiful. The abbé shied at first, then argued and quibbled point by point, at last yielded practically all along the line, reserving to himself no more than the right to believe that there is more edifying reading than the works of the Casuists. On all besides he surrendered unconditionally, and promised henceforth to be very prudent.

Here, precisely, in this attitude so novel for him, lies the mystery. We cannot be certain as to the origin of the affair, but everything suggests that the initiative came from very high up—from Louis XIV himself, directly or indirectly. The King indeed, who missed nothing connected with Jansenism, could not follow with an indifferent, still less with a complacent eye the provocative outpourings of the abbé, with their great indulgence to the sect, their strictures on the Order which served, too ardently perhaps, yet efficiently, the royal policy against them.

There was nothing to be said for one who had meddled, so far as his youth would allow, in the intrigues of the Fronde, who had been warmly devoted to the Cardinal de Retz, and so had been the one member of the Assembly of the Clergy to harass Mazarin. For the glory of his virtue, all might have been pardoned him: but here he was, clearly not cured of his youthful turbulence, daring to affirm that the Jansenists had no "immoral doctrines", and that the real danger to the Church lay on the other side of the barricade.

It seems to me probable enough therefore that about this time, 1678-84, the idea should have occurred to Louis XIV that he must sooner or later consider exterminating the second Port-Royal which La Trappe was threatening to become. Rancé's friends at court—du Charmel or Bellefonds or Brancas—would have got wind of the danger. Whether by arrangement with the King or of their own notion, they would then have made the abbé realise that the moment was critical and that, unless he could make up his mind to the necessary withdrawals, the worst might happen.

At any rate the pressure is obvious and the alarm it aroused in him. Le Lasseur would like to credit Père de la Chaise—always friendly to Rancé—with the drawing-up of the interrogatory. I beg to offer my compliments to the author—Père de la Chaise or another—for the work is a little miracle of dialectic and humour.

"*First question:* The question is whether at the time of the Council of Nicæa, a solitary could have said in a pronouncement on faith: 'I accept the Council, but as to the dispute between Athanasius and the Arians, I do not enter into that: I hold myself apart for fear of disturbing my solitude.'"

Athanasius and the Jesuits! The parallel is all the more amusing for being so just in the circumstances, though the solitary might not have enjoyed its piquancy as we do: but—did I not say a moment ago, that all did not take him seriously on *all* points?

"What right would he have in such a pronouncement to judge Athanasius for his teaching on morals, to condemn him and to publish the condemnation to the whole world? Why not take sides against the Arians—why take sides against Athanasius? Is one action more disturbing to solitude than the other?"

Their close reading of the *Provinciales* had not been time wasted. As to this bloodless duel, it must have taken some time, as the abbé did not surrender till 1684, assuredly without joy. I repeat: to have swallowed such a pill, he must have felt altogether desperate. The conqueror bore himself well. There was no publicity. There was no triumphing over the conquered lion. Definitely everyone comes out of it well—except the lion.

Yet he was an odd beast, more tamed than his admirers would like to admit. One of the manifold uses he was henceforth to make of his claws was to worry his one-time friends. Not only did he leave the Jesuits in peace, in obedience to one of the articles of his capitulation, but he turned his challenges and his aggressive temper against the Jansenists with increasing animosity—an extreme of conversion which the King as a gentleman had not asked of him. Even the most docile Catholic is not called upon to tear in pieces to-day what yesterday he adored. A man renounces a doctrine, or a temper of mind, or the too obvious manifestations of a sympathy which might look like a lingering adherence to the proscribed error: but he

does not renounce the sacred obligations imposed on him by long friendship: still less does he search for weapons against old friends in the confidences of that closed past. I cannot pardon certain disciples of Lamennais for the futile, and so doubly cruel, stories hurled by them at their former master. The majority continued to love him. Long after the *Paroles d'un Croyant*, one of the most extreme of ultramontanists, Père d'Alzon, founder of the Assumptionists and of *La Croix*, put his country-house at the disposal of Lamennais when he was ill. The great Jansenist friends of Rancé deserved no less regard.

But the persistent enmity he was to display towards them passes understanding. It may have been a rancorous memory of the dangers their friendship had caused him to run: or a blind zeal for good doctrine: or perhaps he had learnt horrid secrets of their method of work. But more probably it was one of those periodic break-downs, one of those "flights" of which his history presents us with so many examples. "How can they be heretics?" he had cried in the presence of Quesnel. "Men who are the light of the Church." Very suddenly the "light" ceased to dazzle him. He swept them from his door-step, and with them that warmth of admiration which had seemed eternal. Yet for a while they continued to load each other with praises: though on La Trappe's side, there was no heart in them. Père Le Lasseur considers that the change of front was complete towards 1692—that is to say, when Nicole ranged himself with Mabillon in the quarrel on monastic studies. "The Abbot of La Trappe bore him a grudge for that and felt that the moment had come to break with the leaders. . . . Opportunities came as of themselves."

"An ardent Jansenist," continues Le Lasseur, "the abbé

Maupas, seriously compromised in the affairs of . . . Caulet, bishop of Pamiers, first confined in the prisons of Montpellier, then transferred to the seminary of Narbonne . . . had obtained from the Court permission to withdraw to La Trappe, there to end his days in penance. He arrived 7th June 1692. The abbé refused not only to accept him as a religious but even to speak to him or see him . . . and obtained from the king an authorisation not to conform to his order. Maupas left La Trappe 30th June and took refuge in Paris, where, in accord with information given by Rancé, he was seized upon a *lettre de cachet* which relegated him to Limoges." "M. Dubois," adds Le Lasseur, "here feels it necessary to justify his hero, and he does it at great length. It is waste of time: Rancé's conduct in this business seems unworthy of a noble and generous soul."

A fair comment: he who once opened every door to stricken Jansenists whose one desire was to be silent—for which I praise him much!—now, more royalist than the King, refused a shelter to the inoffensive poor devil whom Louis XIV had confided to his charity! "My friends," says the solitary, "the things of this world no longer concern me." So strong was his passion to show that he had nothing in common with these men, that he would not even *see* Maupas —he who never wearied of being interviewed. Even that was not enough: he telephoned, so to speak, to the police of Paris the address and description of the wanted man.

"At this news," groans Dubois, "the whole sect rose against him"—and so do we, who can scarcely be suspected of Jansenism, and all good men of that day besides. They did not hide their indignation, and the abbé had once more to publish an apologia. We shall waste no time in discussing it: enough to say that it is not even fine writing.

To overwhelm his victim he tells long and wearying stories, which even if true would not have justified him. Between ourselves, in spite of his former declamations against the Casuists, he had at no time very much to learn about mental reservation. But after his capitulation he used it beyond all bounds—even the Casuists would not have demanded so much!

Then in 1694 we have that famous letter of contempt on the death of Arnauld. "At last! So M. Arnauld is dead! After having dragged on his life as long as he could, it has at last had to finish"—would he have preferred suicide?—"At any rate, that means the end of the dispute. His learning and authority were of great weight in the party. Happy the one that has no other than that of Jesus Christ!" This irrepressible "ouf" might have been uttered by Sainte-Beuve—or even me—but not with the man scarcely dead: and from the pen of a former friend, to whom the dead man had wished so well, it does not make pleasant reading.

But we must do Rancé this much justice: the bombs he hurled never worked havoc for long. The sensation caused by this one was enormous, exasperating the Jansenists, offending all men of decent feeling. "You know, Reverend Father," du Charmel wrote him, "that the greater part of those who are offended deserve your consideration: for they are the holiest part of the Church and the part which preserves most respect for you and your work. They are very much surprised at the small justice you render M. Arnauld, considering what he always rendered you, and you will permit me to tell you sincerely that your feeling is condemned by everyone. It is attributed to policy."

As the culmination of their perfidy, or their simplicity,

or quite simply—why not, after all?—of their long-suffering and evangelical fervour, the Jansenists, after the first shock of emotion, pardoned him again. The whole of their conduct in relation to him seems to say: "You can do what you like, you will *not* stop us venerating you, clinging to you and regarding your work 'as one of the greatest marvels of our day, a miracle of grace.'" Let him cease therefore to mock at them: he is no longer with them: we know it, we know it, he has cried it only too often from the house-tops: if he does not stop, he will end by making us all Jansenists. Yet let us comprehend him. Since as late as yesterday he wore a coat of another colour, this neo-ermine is insatiable in his thirst for whiteness!

Two years after Arnauld's death, with the idea perhaps of arriving at a reconciliation, "Charles Wallon de Beaupuis, former *préfet des petites écoles* at Port-Royal, asked Rancé's permission to visit La Trappe—not for the first time—where he had had three nephews, and where one of his dearest pupils, Dom Pierre Lenain, was still living." The permission was granted—with all respect to Dubois, who tries to insinuate that it was not. Wallon was seventy-five, and he would not have undertaken so hard a journey, on foot and in the heat of summer, if he had feared to find the door closed to him.

"When he arrived, Rancé refused to let him see his friend Lenain. He asked only to embrace him, without saying a word to him, in the abbé's presence, and was met with another refusal. He insisted that he must have an explanation, and it was promised him if he would bind himself by oath to silence. He preferred to depart without learning anything."

There you have the very luxury of inhumanity. Luxury

is the only word: for it is more than obvious that if he had permitted the old man to embrace Lenain, no one could have thought that he was thereby renewing his relations with the party.

Again there was an outburst of wrath among the Jansenists: the peace-loving Tillemont, who later chose to die in the arms of Wallon, now wounded to the heart, could think of nothing but to go and confide his grief to Rancé himself: and Rancé could think of nothing but to throw the responsibility on the King: a letter from the court had mentioned Wallon as a man to avoid. It was almost true. Such a letter existed, but four years old and motived by atrocious accusations of a plot against the State, of which the falsity had been so clearly recognised that the accuser, a canon of Beauvais, had been hanged. Thus again two or three steps too many along the road which leads from mental reservation to inexcusable lying.

If it had not had the memorable consequences I am about to relate, I should not have mentioned this painful episode which, at the point we have reached, teaches us nothing we did not already know. But it is a fact, still little known, that from 1696 onwards the anti-Jansenism of the abbé grew to a point of frenzy that we can scarcely imagine. Hatred or fear, we know not which: but it became a veritable *phobia*—as though the Jesuits had bewitched him: and from afar off, at that, since they did not weary him with their visits. Yet there remained one difference between him and them, in that *his* campaign against the Jansenists was underground.

On his return, Tillemont made a critical enquiry into the equivocating reply given him at La Trappe, and wrote to the abbé a long letter, in which he set out all his complaints

and the complaints of the party. Among other details, he set down, on the subject of the supposed orders of Louis XIV, some very embarrassing questions, which Rancé must have read with a blush and which, in his reply, he had the prudence to ignore. His reply, in fact, written in his most telling style, was a long and already terrible series of charges against his former friends—we say "already", because this assuredly was not his last or worst word. He gave some of the reasons which had always prevented him "from forming any connections with the Jansenists, in addition to his own intelligence which had always kept him from them." He draws up the list, unspeakably disagreeable to them, of all the pious and learned men who, at first dazzled by their airs of virtue, had soon ceased to make common cause with them, and of those of their followers who had abjured Jansenism on their deathbed. He exhumed ruthlessly—as an old friend from whom nothing was hidden—certain dark family secrets. A few lines will give the tone of the thing:

"One day I asked another doctor of the Faculty of Paris, who had had a very close union with the Jansenists, and who had always been in their assemblies"—perhaps J. de Sainte-Beuve—"what had obliged him to leave them. He answered me that *there is no man of goodness and honour who can endure such a society.*"

The Jesuits themselves would not easily have forged a more deadly formula. All the rest is in keeping. But Rancé having re-read these five pages, put them in his pocket, or rather in the archives of La Trappe. Once he was dead, they could be published if the party, after so many rebuffs, continued to claim him.

Why this sudden timidity? Possibly he feared the too

easy *riposte*—those signed letters of his which the Jansenists had not destroyed and which expressed very different sentiments. Yet on the other hand would not this counter-offensive be just as formidable, even *more* formidable, after his death. All this looks incoherent: as though he did not know which way to turn. But we know that he was already arming himself some time since for this posthumous warfare: as witness the curious document published by Sainte-Beuve in Volume IV of the *Port-Royal*, which must have been dictated by Rancé soon after the letter to Bellefonds, since it is still outspoken against the Jesuits—though his principal grudge is against the Jansenists.

He knew, he wrote, "that when a certain bishop of great merit who was favourable to them was so ill that it was thought that he had only a short time to live, they pressed him to write a letter to the King on the affairs of the Church, and as his weakness and the greatness of his malady prevented him, they set someone to do it; the letter was written, but the bishop having recovered, it was not given to him. Yet it had certainly been composed with art and study; the thoughts, the expressions and the style of a dying man had been imitated as far as possible; and they would not have failed to get it taken as the product of the heart and mind of a man who was about to appear at the judgment of God, though in truth he had no other part in it than that of having consented to it (in principle), which is a dissimulation which will never have the approbation of those who make profession of being sincere." A charming splinter from the posthumous arrows he was reserving for them: but we have more than that. It is not exact to say, as does Le Lasseur by a strange slip, that Rancé's unposted reply to Tillemont "is the last word of

the Reformer on the Jansenists." The last word—the most formal and crushing of his pronouncements — the final exorcism—was confided by Rancé to Saint-Simon.

We do not know the recipient of that letter of Saint-Simon, of which we shall quote the principal passages, but the authenticity of this most precious document appears incontestable. We can fix the date approximately, by a line from the *Mémoires* (1698) on " something intimate and entirely secret " which " had passed eighteen months since . . . between M. de la Trappe and me." This must have been either a little before or, perhaps better, a little after the incident of Wallon de Beaupuis and Tillemont's letter, between June and December 1696.

Saint-Simon begins by saying that, though he had not gone deeply into the dogmatic question, what he had learnt " of the greater part of those who have most appeared in these disputes with the imputation of Jansenism," and what he had seen " with his own eyes in the greater part of those who were accused of it," had " given him so high an idea of their virtue " that he had had " difficulty in believing their doctrine bad and that, influenced by some of his closest friends," he " hesitated long on the point of allying himself with that side."

" I hid nothing from M. l'abbé de la Trappe, and you know what has been his constant kindness to me. In a journey that I took to see him, I made known to him what was passing within me, and I begged him to enlighten me, to direct me, to guide me."

Note that we are here on the very threshold of the confessional: we are dealing no longer with the excited controversialist but with the priest. That his passion, roused by recent collisions with the party, should have

more or less coloured his reply, was inevitable: but his conscience and the solicitude inspired in him by a soul particularly dear to him, for which he was responsible before God, should have spoken louder.

" He demanded of me secrecy until his death, for reasons worthy of his charity and his prudence. . . ."

Note his " until his death." It is of capital importance here. Like the apologias written out and provisionally locked away, this conversation was to be published one day. So Rancé intended; and admittedly he could not easily have confided his posthumous defence to a more sonorous or more daring pen.

" He advised me to be on my guard against being deceived by outward appearances. . . . He added that he had formerly seen among them men whom he had thought saints, and whom he had found to have only outward shows and to be very great sinners. He enlarged on that with confidence, for my instruction, though with his accustomed prudence and charity, in a manner to leave me convinced that what had touched me most was only the more seductive and perilous. On that I do not think it necessary to enlarge here."

But he could have, had he wished. Manifestly names were mentioned to him, and those the names which *had* to be mentioned to open his eyes, the names, that is, of those among these " great sinners " who had given Saint-Simon " so high an idea of their virtue."

" He assured me that Jansenism was existent, condemned, opposed, rebellious and dangerous to the Church and even to the State, and conjured me to remember this conversation always and to give thanks to God for not having allowed me to fall upon so dangerous a reef. . . " " He

added that he had been closely united with the chief of those who had passed for Jansenists. . . . The bishop of Aleth [among others]. This great bishop had been very far from Jansenism, very much opposed to it even, when he went to consult him in his own house [just after his conversion]. That, the evening before he came away, that prelate took him to sit by the bank of a torrent, where they conferred alone for four hours on Jansenism, that M. d'Aleth forgot nothing that might preserve him from it; that such were his sentiments at that time and with full knowledge of the case; that since then much machinery had been set in motion to make him change, and that he was lost in wonder as to how that machinery had been able to succeed."

And that remains an enigma to this day. How did they succeed in so completely swinging round the great Pavillon? But likewise, after having received such warnings, how could Rancé too have let himself be swung round, even to the point of loudly proclaiming the orthodoxy of Jansenism?

"He assured me that there was neither charity, nor peace, nor submission among real Jansenists, no truth nor good faith as to their doctrine; much harshness, pride and domination in their conduct; that he had himself had experience of this in many things; that he knew men of great goodness—and he named them—who had withdrawn from them because of such experience; that he himself had drawn away many from them . . . of whom some had persevered in thankfulness, others had let themselves fall back through worldly views—of whom some had died unrepentant—and others had again become great sinners; that many of their most considerable men were held to them by the bonds of friendship."

For himself, " his state, his taste, and his choice was silence." So he had avoided " consistently and with all his heart . . . controversy." Not being " a master in Israel " —a humorous touch presumably—and seeing the good cause " so powerfully sustained and upheld "—by the Jesuits, I take it—he had remained aside from the battle, " but he had not therefore wished his sentiments to be in doubt, and after his death writings would be found which would set them out in all their fullness."

And Saint-Simon concludes: " I have abridged and omitted many things in order to confine myself solely to the essential. This conversation kept me from Jansenism for the whole of my life."

Naturally! And rightly too. We cannot blame Rancé for having brought Saint-Simon to that resolution. Jansenism is a real heresy and no mere phantom. Every true Catholic has the strict duty to be on his guard against a sect, which perhaps does not know its own nature or at least is unconscious of the poison it bears in itself, yet is only the more dangerous for that. But the historian can but be puzzled by the reasons on which the abbé founds his opinion.

Here again there are enigmas in plenty. I have already noted one—the difficulty of reconciling so implacable a judgment with the previous conduct of the judge himself. It is, of course, just possible to suppose that, after his letter to Bellefonds, new and sinister facts came to his knowledge: but supposing it were so, did he check particular facts with the calm seriousness demanded for an enquiry of this sort from an honourable man, a Christian and above all a priest? On the watch for everything said or done, the most pointless nonsense set him in a rage. And even had the facts been

certain, still he had no right to impute them to the Jansenist leaders, when the blame belonged of right either to a handful of insignificant fanatics or to one or other of those dubious agents who intrigued behind the scenes—for whose profit Heaven alone knows.

And a second enigma is in this: that up to the present the writers of the religious history of the seventeenth century held, or seemed to hold, as negligible, even as non-existent, these terrible declarations against the Jansenists, which in fact constitute the supreme message, the true last will and testament of the great Abbot of La Trappe. Can it be that, without admitting it in so many words, the friends of Jansenism, like its enemies, feel vaguely that the testimony of the Thundering Abbot need not be taken too tragically?

## Chapter VII

## THE ASSAULT ON SAINT-MAUR

"God disposed things by his Providence in such manner that the saintly Abbé could not avoid the necessity of publishing several excellent works, which he did only with extreme repugnance and in obedience to the orders of heaven." We have already seen the invincible naïveté of Dom Lenain. He has made his own the mission of authenticating and spreading abroad what we may call the auto-legend of the abbé. An important—and highly unconvincing—feature of the legend is that Rancé never published anything save against his will. The booksellers were ever on the watch for his "copy", for which there was brisk demand, and there was always someone to unearth for their profit the manifestos, supposed to be confidential, which he scattered among his friends. Witness the reply to Le Roi. "I think you know," writes Bossuet, "that the printing of this work [one of Rancé's most carefully finished] came about through the avarice of a bookseller . . . upon a copy." And not being a fool, he adds jestingly: "You will tell me that if no copies had been given, he would not have had that one. Quite true. . . ."

For the publication, in 1683, of his great work—*De la Sainteté et des Devoirs de la Vie monastique*—Rancé did not quite go so far as to pretend that it was done without his knowledge. Credulity has its bounds. But he consented, if we are to believe him, only with the most extreme

reluctance. Nothing was further from his thoughts than a learned treatise, composed of set purpose. The book had grown of itself, day by day over fifteen years, being simply notes made with a view to the exhortations he addressed to his monks—translations, with comments, of the ancient ascetical writers. Many a time he was entreated to revise these note-books and send them to the printer. He was altogether unwilling. The first duty of a Trappist is silence. One day, even, when he was being strenuously pressed, he hurled these pages "into the fire, and putting his foot on them, calmly watched them burn . . . smiling." So in our own day Dante Gabriel Rossetti buried the manuscript of his early verses with his young wife. But don't be alarmed. The grave gave back its poems, and with even less difficulty Rancé's book was to spring again from its ashes: several copies of these precious pages were already circulating inside La Trappe and outside. So that Rancé was even able to revel without expense in the luxury of a *second* holocaust! "He decided to burn it again," writes that unconscious humorist, Dom Lenain, in concluding this odd story, which we would prefer to believe was entirely his own invention: but we have already seen Rancé's love for the theatrical.

These copies had been made by the care of M. Maine, the secretary. He it was who, on his own initiative, passed one on to Bossuet. Our documents do not name him, but the identification appears to me practically certain. He realised that the approbation of such a judge would soon conquer Rancé's hesitation. The book did in fact strike Bossuet as marvellous. And it arrived at the right moment —just after that Assembly of the Clergy (1682) at which Bossuet had hurled fire and flame against "relaxed

moral teaching"—or, to be quite honest, against the Jesuits.

"After the breaking up of the Assembly," he writes to his friend, "I began to read it: and I admit that coming from the shameful laxities and moral filth of the Casuists, I needed to be consoled by these heavenly ideas of the life of solitaries and monks. I hope soon to finish reading it, and I do so with sensible consolation."

Three months later he wrote again: "No one can have a greater desire than I to see published so many holy and adorable truths, apt to renew the monastic order, to inflame the ecclesiastical order and to excite the laity to penance and Christian perfection. . . . The affairs of the Church go very ill. The pope threatens us openly with formidable constitutions. . . . A good intention with so little understanding is a great evil in such high places. Let us pray! let us sigh!" Thus, concludes Dubois, "all was determined . . . and all done in spite of the abbé de Rancé." Rancé himself speaks of the constraint he had to bear. "In composing this work," he writes, "my intentions went no further than the instruction and moral formation of my brethren." But for all that he admitted time and again that he had other and more provocative intentions—and the whole book fairly shouts it.

"God allowed it to fall into the hands of M. de Meaux [Bossuet] who, unchecked by my feelings and my resistance, wished it to become public. For my part, since I know full well that monks are called to silence as well as solitude and that their mouths must be for ever closed upon all that is outside the compass of their cloisters, I would have been careful not to presume to open mine, joining to this general reason . . . the opposition I feel within me,

since my retreat, to having myself spoken of in the world."

This of course is the official version, addressed to the abbé Nicaise for communication to all Europe. What he said Rancé believed, as usual, while he was saying it. But be very certain of this—that had Rancé not wished, really *wished*, the publication of his book, neither Bossuet nor anyone else would have brought him to change his mind. Not that, at the beginning of his reform, Rancé had any thought of making his abbatial conferences public. But your born writer does, sooner or later, become conscious of his vocation. His first book—that in which he massacres Le Roi—written so majestically and so easily, showed him his gifts as a religious pamphleteer. Other writings upon various occasions and the daily round of his correspondence turned the thing into a habit. Once launched, he never stopped: in 1683 *La Sainteté et les Devoirs . . .*; in 1685 a large volume of *Eclaircissements*; in 1689 the *Explication de la Règle de saint Benoît*; in 1692 the *Réponse à Mabillon*; in 1693 a further reply to Mabillon—though this last was left for the time being unpublished. And all this with no trace of effort: on the contrary, a rushing, measureless outpouring, the most quenchless passion to conquer and to write. Neither Bossuet nor his other friends encouraged the torrent: rather they tried to check it, but—apart from Louis XIV—was there any human power that could check the abbé de Rancé? The success of these two thick octavo volumes was almost as shattering as that of the *Provinciales*. On the one hand the same dazzled admiration, and on the other hand, the not less intense consternation of a host of victims. Up till now it was only the Jesuits: now it was the whole monastic

body of France, including, as we shall see, the Carthusians.

But first for the enthusiasm: today we find some difficulty —I do not say in sharing it, for that would be impossible, but in understanding it. From the doctrinal point of view, the book had nothing remarkable: Rancé's intellect was not original nor even powerful. To compare him in this matter with Bossuet—which has been done—seems sheerly ridiculous, or, to speak Rancé's language, sacrilegious. There never was a mind less studious, more incapable of getting to the bottom of any subject whatsoever. He even, under pressure, made a virtue of this congenital impotence. As he made all his own tendencies into rules of conduct, all religious speculation seemed to him not only futile but actually pernicious. Forced by Mabillon to allow that monks might read *some* of the Fathers, he limited the concession to those of their works which treat directly and exclusively of *practice*. Above all, no dogma! The least speculation is time wasted, the seed of pride. The original sin of the heretic, says Bossuet, is to choose: no, says Rancé, it is to think. Mabillon admirably exposes the futility of this *phobia* which could result only in dechristianising the intellect.

" Christian morality," he said, " has a necessary relation with the science of dogma, because true piety is founded on the knowledge of God, and usually, in proportion as that knowledge is more perfect, piety is also more solid. . . . If you forbid monks the study of dogmas, you must also . . . extend the prohibition to the expositions of the Fathers on Scripture, such as those of St Augustine on the Psalms . . . where there is almost as much dogma as in his other works. Or at least you would have to distinguish

what concerns dogma in these works from what is purely moral, which would be very difficult, not to say impossible. But why should one make this distinction, since the Fathers read aloud the greater part of these expositions to the people, and the mass of the faithful were much instructed and edified? Why should not solitaries too draw the same profit?"

St Benedict says, in his rule, that there is no writing of the Fathers which is not able to bring us to God: "Why then take from us half of that loaf which our Father offers us, the Church grants us, immemorial possession permits us? . . . But we may say what we like. . . ." And in vain has St Augustine condemned the false humility of those who are unwilling to leave the infant class for fear of being exposed to the danger of pride: "Do not think, therefore, that humility forbids you to aspire to sublime knowledge." Humble of heart we must be, but also lofty of intellect. How splendid they are, Mabillon with his "half-a-loaf" and Augustine calling us to the sublime, and how small a thing Rancé looks beside them!

It is true that a great spiritual school, equally concerned to stimulate ascetical effort, holds pious speculation cheap enough. But whatever may be said of their moral teaching —which admittedly they do not push as far as Rancé—the Jesuits are immeasurably superior to him in knowledge of souls. To be truly practical, you must look at more than the practical. Rancé was not, in the fullest sense of the word, a moral theologian: he was only an eloquent amplifier. Totally ignorant of himself, and hence of his neighbour, he addressed himself to the monk *in se*—in the air—a sheer abstraction: or, what comes to the same thing, a monk of the time of St Anthony and St Pachomius.

The Jesuit studies the living, you and me: he shows us our profoundest weaknesses, makes the examination of conscience easy, would almost let us dispense with it, so well does he know us: thus he paralyses and stifles the various microbes of pharisaism. So much cannot be said for Rancé: he had none of the gifts of the pedagogue. He proceeded by heroic proclamations, limited himself to vague oracles. The Jesuit, patient, calm, human, stripped of illusion, gives exact, practical advice—remedies—almost recipes. Needless to say I am comparing Rancé here with the great Jesuit masters: and I affirm that between him and Rodriguez, for instance, or Bourdaloue, no sound mind at all instructed on the things of the interior life can possibly hesitate.

Rancé's horizon was bleak and depressingly restricted. For him, it would seem, there was but one virtue—penance—and, what is worse, exterior penance. The handful of *idées fixes* which governed his reform—manual work, perpetual silence, abstinence, prohibition of study—seem equally to govern the whole of his spiritual doctrine, whereas, not only in a St Francis de Sales but in St Benedict too, the interior comes before all.

All that apart, the book is ill-constructed, or rather it is not a book at all; it has all the drawbacks of a catechism and none of the advantages. Even Dubois admits: "What is lacking in this work, as in the others of the abbé de Rancé, is inter-relation of parts, *ensemble*, unity in truth."

Yet, when all is said, the prodigious success—more sensational be it noted than lasting—of the *Sainteté et des Devoirs monastiques* is easily explained. If round about 1860 Bernadette had written the story of Lourdes, she

would have had millions of readers. In 1683 the eyes of all France were on La Trappe. Nothing issuing from La Trappe could find the public indifferent, least of all a book by the great abbé, having for its object to set out in some manner the philosophy of so much that was miraculous. And then—perhaps most important of all—remember that for the Frenchman of all ages (and particularly for the Frenchman of that most academic age) there is one thing more irresistible than excellence of construction or excellence of doctrine: that thing is style.

"He is the man who writes best in the kingdom," was the judgment of Ménage; and Pellisson, that model academician, in thanking Rancé for sending his book, said: "My custom is to express my thanks for a book as soon as I have received it—and for a good book when I have had time to read it. The more closely I have looked at yours—and even listened to it at table—the more satisfaction I have found in it. It has often given me a mind, on leaving the table, to go and pay a visit to your monastery and practise the exercises there observed. . . . I have even marvelled that in the midst of your austerities, you should be able to surpass us all in elegance as in piety, and write better than those who think only of writing." Rancé did not think only of writing, but he did think of it. Yet he was no purist. In the pamphlets published against him, little quibbles over style figure largely. He is accused of coining words—as *désoccupation*, *inapplication*, *messéance*, *prohiber*, *manutention*: and there is a pleasing irony in the thought that the word *mansuétude* became French only on the day when it pleased the Thundering Abbot to appropriate it to his uses.

His phrasing is stately and rhythmical, yet at times a

little obese and swollen with wind: "A man," says the *Timocrate*, "whose only aim in speech is to heap word upon word without taking care of what they mean." Thus he writes:—The monk "*se représente ces flammes de feu, ces abîmes souterrains, ces ténèbres affreuses et ces descentes obscures toutes prêtes à recevoir ceux qui y seront précipités.*" The pamphlet comments: "It is scarcely possible to imagine a statement less ordered and more void of common sense." All these words can only mean the same thing, but "there is further a certain reversal of order contrary to all the rules and leading us to think that the visions of this worthy monk were aided by a certain light-headedness. He represents himself in hell, in the flames, and suddenly, as if he had forgotten that he is already there, he thinks of the obscure descent by which one goes there."

But the separate phrases are good, for all that: and after all, even more than the perfection of each phrase, it is the animation of the whole which is the chief quality of Rancé's style. It is neither mere rhetoric nor real sublimity: but something unanalysable between the two. The secret of Rancé is that extraordinary gift of weaving a spell which, at the outset, makes us see him as he sees himself, as he wants to be seen—as the St Bernard of the seventeenth century. He is so vibrant, that it does not even occur to us that he is acting: so august and godlike, even in his thundering, that it occurs to no one that he is not the master of his own mind or heart. Whatever he says, our first instinct is to take it for gospel. "It is not surprising," writes Dom Thuillier, in his account of the Rancé-Mabillon duel, "that this eloquent abbé won over certain minds upon their first reading of this work. He treats his subject with so much vehemence and impetuosity, so much charm and

vivacity, and he gives to all he says so great an air of mystery and consequence that unless you can resist sense impressions he not only leads but sweeps you where he will. It is a torrent of words which whirls you away without giving you leisure to reflect on the reasons."

This is clearly seen and truly said. It is in fact impossible to read these different writings seriously without soon coming to feel bitter disappointment. Here and there, doubtless, we may read admiringly what was promised by the title of the first of the series, burning pages on "*la sainteté et les devoirs de la vie monastique*," but alongside these pages, or rather grafted on to them, we find the most vehement and unjust denunciation of the monastic life of the day—an ill-natured satire not promised by the title.

"If this book edifies you, well and good," says Philandre to Timocrate in the first of the pamphlets issued in reply to Rancé's offensive: "for my part," he continues, "I have never been edified by mere outward show; thus I have certainly not been edified by a book in which the author has had no aim but to impress, and has used his mind and his eloquence only to take away the reputation of a countless host of religious for the enrichment of a small number of others." A dispassionate critic would express himself differently, but, apart from his insinuations, Philandre is right. This "torrent of words" rolls pell-mell gold and mud: under the noble curves of the abbatial periods, hide the sharp bones of a controversial pamphlet.

In the famous dispute aroused by this book, the question at issue—and this point seems to me of capital importance—was not properly a conflict on doctrine, as men have doggedly gone on thinking for more than two hundred years: it was an action for defamation of character brought against the

Abbot of La Trappe by the representatives of the religious Orders he had calumniated in his book—Mabillon for the Maurists, Dom Innocent Le Masson for the Carthusians. It is commonly referred to as the "*querelle des études monastiques*": and it is quite true that monastic study was the particular point under discussion between Rancé and Mabillon. But the aim of the great Benedictine was by no means limited to this special controversy: his principal aim, which he never forgot, was to avenge the honour of the Benedictines of Saint-Maur.

As for Dom Le Masson, he ignored entirely the special and less painful problem of monastic studies. And Rancé, all the more magnificent for his conviction of his perfect innocence, was not afraid to face boldly the unanswerable objection brought against him by both, the objection which was the very foundation of the controversy: "You are quite at liberty to interpret the rule of St Benedict to please yourself, and to impose upon your own monks the austerities which that rule seems to you to demand: you are at liberty, too, to applaud at the top of your voice the marvellous perfection to which, thanks to you, La Trappe has been raised; but by what right do you deliver your brethren of the other Orders to public contempt?" We have called this an unanswerable objection: but it did not embarrass *him*. His first reply we might have expected, for he had used it before: literature has no use for the tepid. To be understood, you must hit *hard*. But he had another answer: boldly and tranquilly he admitted the charge. You say I have written a piece of controversy, he cried. And why not? Is there any more charitable way?—The reader may think I am fooling. That only means that he has not yet fathomed the rich depths of Rancé's splendid incompre-

hension of himself. Listen to him, then—but listen carefully, for he is a difficult author, obscure from excess of limpidity.

"Can a man have zeal for the glory of Jesus Christ and suffer that the enemies of religion should use the *evil examples* and the *evil lives* of monks to blaspheme His holy name . . ., imputing to Him the disorderliness of their conduct, as though He were the author of it, as though He had formed them in His Church only that they might do there what we see them do . . .? Shall a man, patiently and in silence, endure that it should be said that monks are *idle* and *useless* creatures; that they are a burden on the public; that cloisters are places of high living and licence, sources of confusion, that there is found in them less order and less rule than among men engaged in the world; that all in them is in movement and dissipation; that Religion consists only in outward show . . .?

"I ask whether, to remedy an evil so great and so scandalous, there can be any means more natural than to make it known that the monks, for the most part, are not at all what they were in their institution; that they have degenerated, some more, some less, from the glory of their origin, that their lustre is tarnished, and that the children of God . . . have lost all their beauty by the relations they have had with the children of men. Why should it be found blameworthy if among the monastic Observances one selects some to support a conclusion so reasonable and so just, and if one shows in particular that this or that Observance has grown lax . . . and if one uses them so, not to inform the world of disorders which are only too well known, but to show it that the conduct of those monks who live in this relaxation is not what they

ought to follow. . . . Thus one restores to the monastic Order the honour of which men rob it so unjustly, by making them see for themselves that if it has fallen from its first lustre by the present practices . . . it is worthy of their esteem . . . when they consider it in its truth; that is to say that the disorders one sees in it must be attributed only to the infidelity of the monks and not to Jesus Christ, whose wisdom is infinite."

There you are, I fancy, all breathless, your ears ringing. Yet steel yourselves to a re-reading of that astonishing passage. There are two points in it—an admission and a justification. Rancé admits without more ado that he has, of set purpose, denounced the decadence of Saint-Maur and the other Orders; but he immediately adds that he could not have done otherwise, without failing in a strict duty. Let us then, with all courage, try to understand him. Not for a moment does it occur to him to enter a protest against the odious picture of a monk drawn by the enemies of religion. He accepts that image, finds it only too true a resemblance, is ready, at need, to blacken it still more. And that men may see more clearly how true it is, he is obliged to paint from life this or that particular Observance —Saint-Maur, for example.

Whereupon, without waiting for more, the historian stops him and interposes a categorical denial. It is not true that in the year of grace 1683, the life at Saint-Maur—we shall discuss the Carthusians later—justified the grave accusations brought against it by the unholy alliance of the free-thinkers and Rancé. One thing only is exact—that the Strict Observance of Saint-Maur (for strict it was and solemnly approved by the Church) did not impose upon its members those austerities—perpetual silence, for example

—in which Rancé, by his own interior light and alone in the world, claimed to see one of the essential elements of the monastic ideal. But even so: even if we grant, against all the evidence, that the Maurists of his time were unworthy religious—whence came to the Cistercian Abbot of La Trappe the urgent duty of confirming by his own witness the traditional jests of the *fabliaux* and the free-thinkers? Had this abbot, who proclaimed himself dead and buried, received from the Pope the mission of reforming Saint-Maur? Supposing he had received it, did he find himself in the pressing necessity of publishing to the whole universe the distresses that he should have tried to cure?

We must be very simple people if we think such questions could lead him to reflection. It was *so* simple: yes, of course, he was bound to publish everything, and as sensationally as possible, for if he failed in that obligation, the free-thinkers would be justified in imputing to St Benedict himself the scandalous examples of the Benedictines of the seventeenth century. Men must know once for all—and without the Abbot of La Trappe, who could have suspected it?—that these Maurists would not have been relaxed if they had obeyed their rule! To advertise their laxity was to pay homage to St Benedict, whose rules are holy, and to "Jesus Christ, whose wisdom is infinite."

That at any rate is how I decipher—with some little difficulty—this astonishing piece of humbug—for why *shouldn't* things be called by their right names? Nor was it one of those absurd, but not very important, *obiter dicta*, such as may easily slip out in the excitement of unprepared speech. The page I have just quoted is from the beginning of the *Eclaircissements*, a book published by Rancé in 1685.

Seven years later, in his reply to Mabillon's *Réflexions*, he again writes:

"What have I done but recall ancient times? Children would be truly to be pitied and utterly abandoned, if one dared not speak to them of the perfection in which their fathers lived. And after all the sin I have committed and the fault of which I am guilty, is that I have done what I could to raise up again those who complain of me and to bring them back to their first excellence. . . . They have acted in my regard against all the rules of gratitude and justice, rendering evil for good. . . . It is acting precisely like a poor man who should rise up against those who would draw him out of his misery and strip him of his rags to put on his neck the collar of gold and clothe him in purple."

It was an odd way of "raising up again" the Benedictines of Saint-Maur, to exaggerate their scandals. He may have hoped by this means to prepare them one day to wear the purple robe, but at the time he was dishonouring them with all his might.

Considering all this, it is surprising that wise prelates, with Bossuet at their head, should have openly taken responsibility for such an aggression. Less offensive works have not escaped the Index. It may be, perhaps, that carried away by the fine passages, they merely skimmed over the others at first: scruples may have come later. But Bossuet had already gone too far to retreat. He had promised his approbation, and with him three of his colleagues—Barillon, Le Tellier and Le Camus. Le Camus prudently delayed his letter, and his name did not appear on the front page of the *Eclaircissements*. They confided their anxiety to each other in whispers: proposed some

alterations; so that the most outrageous excesses would have disappeared. But their timid veneration would scarcely have demanded more than the bare minimum from the Abbot of La Trappe. In any case, we do not really know what were the precise relations between themselves and Rancé—less intimate, I fancy, and less unconstrained than the letters that passed between them might lead us to believe. In Le Camus there is a faint trace of irony. He had small taste for volcanoes. Bossuet was warmer—he valued this friendship. But, if I am not mistaken, he feared the abbé as much as he admired him. We must not forget that practically everybody trembled before his might. At any rate our four approving bishops made up their minds more easily to mortify the monks than to gainsay Rancé.

In this there is a curious phenomenon which I had not suspected before I had studied the history of Rancé. Even at the end of the seventeenth century, the monastic Order had not fully regained its prestige. Perhaps the memory of past scandals still weighed upon it. Certainly Rancé's violent attacks shocked both the bishops and the generality of good men less than we could wish. While the controversy lasted, Bossuet adopted a very high tone towards Saint-Maur. In his letters he treated them with a lofty severity as men who had neither honour nor rights to defend. He did not actually speak of them—though Rancé did—as " ces petits hommes ", but he thought it. The Maurist, Dom Mège, having published, as an indirect reply to Rancé's censures, a commentary on the rule of St Benedict, Bossuet fell like a fireball upon the Fathers of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, demanded and at once obtained the withdrawal of the book from circulation. To have

yielded so quickly, on a point of such importance, Saint-Maur must have felt itself truly helpless. And as, under *le grand Roi*, the rules of the game demanded certain face-saving gestures, Bossuet assembled a commission, under his own presidency, to settle the true meaning of the Benedictine rule in the letter and in the spirit.

It all seems like a dream when we think of the well-nigh infallible authorities—Mabillon, Martène—whose place was taken by these splendid incompetents. But Dom Mège (with whose conclusions the very learned Dom Cuthbert Butler, in our own day, agrees)—Dom Mabillon, Dom Martène—these men were mere monks—which is to say, nothing much. But, you protest, Rancé was a monk himself. True: but unclassifiable, not as other monks, in any case a man above the law. It was not his white robe that so powerfully impressed Bossuet, the town and the court. In this conflict which he himself set going, and in which everything seems to us now to have put him in the wrong, he had on his side, not the independent, as we shall see, but the powerful.

Dubois attacks with pious horror the pamphlet—admittedly indefensible—clandestinely distributed by a young Maurist, Père de Sainte-Marthe. "Mme de Guise," writes Dubois, "Bossuet . . ., the archbishops of Rheims and of Paris were indignant at it and sought to discover whose was the faithless hand which hid thus in the darkness to strike such blows." Well—it was not the hand of a martyr, certainly, but of a monk exasperated by the insult to his Order, and with a preference for his abbey rather than the Bastille! Rancé could safely sign his own pamphlets: those who replied could not.

"You complain of being persecuted," wrote Sainte-

Marthe; "grant, if it please you, that I examine whether you are not the persecutor of a crowd of monks whom you have attacked, taking from them the means of a just defence which is not refused to the worst criminals: yet that is what you have done by your influence. It is known that a great Princess went to beg Père Mabillon to lay down his arms and leave you in peaceful enjoyment of your victory. Everyone knows of the intrigue you have set on foot at Court and in the Council to prevent a reply and stop the printing . . ."

Calumnies, says Dubois: "If he who made himself their mouthpiece had been obliged to prove what he advanced, he would have found himself much embarrassed." Not at all! Dubois himself tells us a hundred pages earlier that the Chancellor, Michel Le Tellier, "had informed the abbé de Rancé, through M. Félibien des Avaux, that he had refused permission to three critics of his book, and that he would never suffer anything unfriendly to him or to his work to be printed." It is equally certain that first the duchesse de Guise, then the Archbishop of Paris, then the Chancellor did everything possible to prevent Mabillon replying to Rancé. The Archbishop of Paris considered that the permission demanded by Mabillon should be refused or indefinitely suspended. When it was learnt that in spite of this he proposed to publish his reply, the Chancellor sent for him. "It depended only on M. de Rancé," writes Gervaise, "to prevent the printing of the book; the authorities offered him this, even pressed it on him. It is entirely to his generosity and his magnanimity that we may attribute the publication of this work." Marvellous! If it is true, then Rancé the gentleman has re-appeared. But this solitary gesture sufficed him. When by the

authority of the law the reply of the General of the Carthusians was suppressed, Rancé uttered never a word.

The first official reply from Saint-Maur—Mabillon's *Traité* on monastic studies—appeared in 1691—nine years after the aggression. Nine years! Certainly these so-called persecutors did not lack patience. The *Quatre Lettres* of Sainte-Marthe followed soon after: these could not have displeased all the Maurists—*homines sunt*—but they publicly disowned them. These true lovers of peace—weak beside, for the reasons we have shown, and timid—at first set themselves to soften their inflexible adversary by taking things quietly. But as he redoubled his attacks, book after book, they could no longer refuse the issue. Even then, their entrusting the defence to the gentle Mabillon showed clearly enough that they had no thought of returning blow for blow.

More anxious, I fancy, than he cared to appear, the abbé awaited him resolutely. "I have not yet seen the book . . . I cannot believe that the author, however great his erudition, solidly proves what he advances." After having read him: "It is true that Père Mabillon's *Traité* had been looked upon as a work to which no reply was possible. Nevertheless it has appeared to me faulty in many places, which has but confirmed me in a view I have had for some time, which is that those who are regarded as great men make mistakes like others, and what is peculiar to them—they are unwilling to be corrected." Once more you see that he had no sense of the ridiculous.

A few days later he writes more heatedly: "In truth I must say this: The Reverend Père Mabillon is strangely in opposition to himself, and nothing marks more strongly the character of the human mind . . .; when it is possessed

by some strong inclination, this inclination blinds it, fetters its reason, takes away its memory."

But I must confess that this first reply of Mabillon is tactically quite hopeless. The promise it gives in its very title—*un Traité des études monastiques*—is redeemed only too well. After showing that the activity of the intellect has always been held in honour in the Benedictine cloisters, he had not the strength to resist the opportunity thus offered him of initiating the young monks into the various branches of study to which their superiors may apply them —including manuscripts, inscriptions, medals! He had already forgotten all about Rancé; and, more and more lost in his subject, the wretched man ended up with "the catalogue of a monastico-ecclesiastical library composed of more than three thousand volumes."

Well, you ask, what then? What is there so terrible in that? Surely it is very natural, and very useful!—So indeed all scholars have judged this fine volume. But do try to remember that the Abbot of La Trappe did not reason as other men reason. This library idea, he thought, could only have taken shape in the mind of a devil or a madman: three thousand volumes in each abbey, and every one of them to be read from the first page to the last by every monk in every abbey!

"Who has ever heard", he cries, "that to be a monk one must be learned in the science of inscriptions, manuscripts and medals?" Mabillon replies in effect: "That's the first I've heard of it: I do not think I have ever written anything approaching *that!*" In fact, as to the medals, he had even felt bound to add a warning that their study "is better suited to seculars than to religious": still it was true that "I added that monks who work for the general

good can, at need, profit by the collections that several scholars have made of medals. It was thus that Cardinal Baronius used them in his history; it was thus that M. de Tillemont, whom a religious could certainly imitate without scruple, made profitable use of them . . . but to say that one can, at need, have recourse to these collections, is not the same as to say that ' to be a monk one must be learned in the science of medals.' "

And now see how right I was to say that Mabillon had erred deplorably in tactics. How could he have failed to see that this *Traité des études monastiques* would suit Rancé's furious propaganda to perfection? The writings of the saintly Abbot of La Trappe had already brought a crowd of youthful Benedictines to a disgust for their vocation: Imagine the disastrous effect upon *them* of such an invitation to the labour of learning!

As Mabillon was later to say—in his reply to Rancé's reply—" the picture drawn by M. l'Abbé of study and monastic learning is so frightful that it may well set minds in revolt against their state, give them a mortal aversion for it and drive them into the necessity of abandoning it, if studies are in use. . . . Do you want to know what that picture is? This is it: ' Study destroys humility. . . . Knowledge is a food foreign to the condition of monks. It can but be harmful to them, unsettle their hearts . . . ruin that foundation of piety, simplicity and purity on which their sanctification depends. There is no more rule, regularity, constitution, discipline, edification nor example in the monasteries where these studies are established.' A learned man, in a religious community ' knows no more retreat, silence, prayer, fasting, vigils, part in the office . . . They make of these houses of peace tumultuous academies.

. . . It is the quickest and most certain means of secularising cloisters and robbing monks of all feeling of their duty.' "

It is astounding that, having read these frenzied absurdities, the mass of critics, including Sainte-Beuve, think they are showing Mabillon a signal favour by allowing that he may nearly have made a draw of it! Astounding, we say, if they have read them: if not, by what right do they discuss the dispute at all?

" After so horrible a picture of studies and learning," continues Mabillon, " M. l'Abbé doubtless has strong reason to say that ' it is a conduct which cannot be approved by God or man, to introduce [intellectual labour into Benedictine abbeys].' For indeed that is a conclusion which follows necessarily from the premises I have just quoted. And therefore it is imperative that we abandon study in the monasteries where it is at present in use, or else close those monasteries for ever—that is to say *all* monasteries except La Trappe and two or three others like it, in order not to expose young men to a state not only dangerous but even incompatible with salvation."

The misfortune is that Rancé was not the only one to draw these extravagant conclusions. When Mabillon's treatise appeared " the most saintly monks in your congregation were scandalised by it," says Gervaise in his reply to Dom Thuillier, historian of the controversy. " Panic-stricken " would be a better word than " scandalised." The idea that they would all have to learn, in addition to Greek and Hebrew, " the science of manuscripts, inscriptions, medals ", filled them with sheer terror: so these excellent religious began a clandestine correspondence with the enemy of their Order.

" Their letters on the subject addressed to the abbot of

La Trappe are still in existence. In them, after having assured him that he could not have composed any work more necessary to religious, they reveal to him with confidence the evils they had themselves observed to follow as necessary consequences the vast studies to which they had been applied." The poor fellows! Yet they had their excuse—it was to indemnify themselves for years of hard work that they now turned spy. It is true that Mabillon, in his second work, let them off studying medals, but this work, continues Gervaise " was not yet sufficient to set at rest the anxiety of the more timorous consciences. Five religious in one band left the abbey of Saint-Denis, where they were being formed in studies of that sort, and came to take refuge at La Trappe. What a shock for all the professed scholars! Impossible to tell all the efforts made by the superiors to tear these poor fugitives from the arms of the saintly abbot. The General at once sent a commission to the prior of Saint-Euvron to betake himself thither and use all means to oblige these monks to return to Saint-Denis; and if reasons, prayers, promises and threats were of no avail, before leaving to pass upon *them* sentence of excommunication and upon the Abbé a command not to suffer them longer to remain in the monastery."

Here I must interrupt even an old friend like Gervaise to inform the uninitiated that the case of these fugitives is covered by Canon Law. After having come to an agreement with his immediate superiors a religious can obtain from Rome permission to leave his convent; but if he leaves it in obedience to the first impulse and without having as a preliminary taken the correct canonical steps, he becomes liable to severe penalties. Under the *ancien régime*, the superiors of a fugitive had the right to compel

him to return, and for that purpose could, if they wished, call upon the civil power.

By flinging wide the doors of La Trappe to receive our five heroes, Rancé was guilty of a grave breach of ecclesiastical law. Nor was it his first offence. Already several pontifical briefs had called upon him to give up various of his captures, and though, as was his custom, he declared these briefs invalid, he had been obliged to make his peace with the competent authorities.

The wisdom of these rules needs no demonstration. The whole monastic order would be plunged in chaos if monks might jump from abbey to abbey at will. Some, from pity or contempt, may think that it would have been better to abandon to the simplicity of their tastes this covey of Benedictines who did not like study. The glory of Saint-Maur could survive without them. But their superiors could not reason so. For them these enemies of Greek were in mortal sin. Their heads heated by a mixture of Rancé and Mabillon, they had given way to a first movement of panic: yet there was some hope that they might be brought back to good sense and strict duty. Besides—and probably more important than anything else—were it only to check the growing contagion, it was necessary thus publicly to oppose Rancé's dictatorial ways. This incident which, thanks to Gervaise, we know in all its details, shows clearly that the peril was not imaginary. The abbé sowed discord everywhere. One of his panegyrists, Dom Serrant, actually admits it. "In fairly well-ordered monasteries", he writes—but "fairly" will not do, Reverend Father: remember that we are concerned with Saint-Maur and the Carthusians!—"In fairly well-ordered monasteries, there were anxieties and troubles. Tender souls came to look

upon their salvation as imperilled if they remained in their observance: turbulent spirits, lovers of change, made difficulties for their superiors, demanding more or less unseasonable reforms, and under pretext of reaching towards a higher perfection, begged entry to La Trappe, equally to satisfy their curiosity and to indulge their love of change."

But to return to our lost birds, and to the rather partisan account given by Gervaise.

"The abbot of La Trappe, who had no other view and no other interest in this affair than the salvation of souls, and in particular of the souls of these youthful monks, left them in the hands of the prior of Saint-Euvron and another religious whom he had brought with him, a close friend of those he wished to take back. Everything was done to bring them to change their resolution. The first day, they held firm and nothing could shake them. Then other devices were tried, which I must be excused from detailing here, and the second day they came to tears on both sides. Their hearts thus softened, four agreed to return, on condition that they should not be obliged to continue their studies and that they should be given a house solitary and apart from men, where they might live as true religious, freed from the conditions which had been so baneful to them."—You recognise in this mingling of honey and vitriol the hand of the Master.—"They promised everything. I know not if they kept faith with them. The fifth was inexorable." Happy monk, this fifth, saved on the one hand from the fatigues of study, and on the other from the scandalous examples of a Martène or a Mabillon!

Nevertheless the *Traité des études monastiques* went on its way. It had, to compensate for the lack of more seductive charms, so much seriousness, and so much

learning, such modesty and true piety of tone, that in the eyes of the majority of readers, Rancé's cause seemed lost: and apart from these qualities, this revelation of a true monk—and one not formed according to the principles of La Trappe—was a more crushing answer to Rancé's rhetoric than any argument.

Yet we know in advance that Rancé would never see that he was beaten. Of course he replied. "I am convinced," he writes, "that Père Mabillon's book attacks and overthrows the first principle on which the whole monastic order has been founded—to wit, sanctity and simplicity." His reply was no less vigorous than what had gone before, though he makes—without acknowledgment, naturally—more than one concession to his adversary: but not on the capital point, I mean the lamentable condition of the religious orders that had not accepted the observances of La Trappe. In treating this he gives us that charming passage, in which is revealed, not without a touch of artifice, his literary sensitiveness. In his imprudent candour, Mabillon had claimed that "profane history, read and studied in a Christian spirit, was admirably calculated to raise us to God and even that it could serve as a preparation for prayer."

"You will never convince me of it," replies Rancé, "and I confess to you, brethren, that I have always been sensitive to those great events which one reads in profane history. . . . Thus every time I have read in Livy of that interview between those two greatest Captains that ever have been, I mean Scipio and Hannibal, and have seen them separate without being able to agree on the conditions of that peace which was the subject of their interview, Scipio taking all hope of peace from his formidable foe,

and thus speaking to him: *Bellum parate, quoniam pacem pati non potuistis;* this circumstance, I say, so extraordinary and so important, would fill my mind for whole days. And when I considered what was the agitation and the movement of two great armies facing a moment which must decide the fate of the world—which the historian expresses in these terms: *Roma an Carthago jura gentibus daret, ante crastinam noctem scituros*—I took sides now with the victor and now with the vanquished as his ill-fortune touched me; and if from that I had had to betake myself to prayer, I would have made strange meditations!" Doubtless he made less distracted and more delicate meditations after the tumultuous hours he gave to the composition of his pamphlets.

Mabillon was guilty of a still blacker crime in permitting the reading of the pagan poets. One can regard the poems of Virgil, thinks Rancé, "as a work of darkness." The *Aeneid* is founded upon "the grossest and most shameful of passions." They argue that St Anselm invited one of his monks to read this accursed poet; alas, replies Rancé, the saints are not sinless. "Can one view with approval that a monk, who by his rule is obliged always to have the judgments of God in his mind, his head bent towards the ground, and to live in unceasing care to guard his heart and his senses, should be able to apply himself to the reading of Virgil?" We may give up the effort to keep any account of his strange notions, but for this one, at least, there is some sort of excuse in the extreme impressionability which, if we are to take him seriously, made the guarding of "his heart and his senses" at once more necessary and more difficult. A poet so little inflammatory as Homer inflamed Rancé. Which proves, by the way, that he did not read

the poets aright. He did not give time for the *catharsis* to elevate him to the spiritual delights of pure poetry. Likewise he wished the world to know—and therefore wrote to the abbé Nicaise—that the slightest mythological engraving upset him. This Nicaise, a great *amateur* of antiques, having sent him, thinking no ill, his book *Les Sirènes, ou Discours sur leur forme et figure*, the frontispiece set Rancé blushing. The book burned his hands! Their "form", just heaven! "I cast my eyes", he replied, "upon your work, *Les Sirènes*; but I admit that I dared not go into it. Every fabulous species re-awakened, and I realised that I was not yet as dead as it behoves me to be." We can picture the innocent engraving: hide, oh hide that breast!

"And who is this who speaks thus?" cries the abbé Dubois, ecstatically; "a holy man, an austere monk, some sixty-five years of age, a penitent these twenty-seven years in the desert!"

I too am all emotion! I remember how as a child I gave my heart to the little siren of Hans Andersen. May Mabillon—chaste as a child at sixty-five as at eight—give me absolution. But you understand better now why M. de Rancé was so anxious to exorcise medals.

Upon reading this vehement *Réponse*, Mabillon was bewildered, or pretended to be. "Who could have believed," he writes, "that my humble *Traité*, written in so simple and I venture to say so moderate a style, could have disturbed ever so little the calm of a hallowed solitude and have caused the least stir in that place of peace, which seems sheltered from all human agitations?" He had taken every conceivable precaution to avoid shocking M. l'Abbé; he had not expressed any sort of disapproval of what was done at La Trappe in the matter of studies; he had confined

himself to a defence of the Benedictine tradition, continued at that day by Saint-Maur; and behold! his book, ringed round with so many precautions, was put on the Index at La Trappe: "They make a frightful picture of it, and expose it to the eyes of the public in the strongest colours that the most ingenious eloquence can furnish."

As we see, he replied in kind. Ceaselessly defamed for ten years, Saint-Maur had had enough. And who can blame them? Later we shall see still more violent reactions from the General of the Carthusians. Provocation apart, what must be our judgment upon his *Réflexions sur la réponse de M. l'abbé de la Trappe au Traité des études monastiques?* Even considered as a work of art, they deserve to be read. In a few months the rather heavy savant of the *Traité* had become quite a respectable writer, not in the highest rank—nor was Rancé for that matter—but very readable. He has none of those sonorous passages, impressive but vague, which soon weary the reader: but a simple acuteness, a peaceable vivacity which seems to ask pardon for its mild explosions, a certain indescribable flower, humble but exquisite, of humanism, above all that accent of conviction and high character that there is no mistaking.

"It seems to me that the abbé regards the religious state as a metaphysical state, and the individual solitaries as so many actual angels, whose every application, every movement, every affection must be uniform, unvarying, and continuous towards the same object, without any share, be it ever so innocent, for other things which are not God. This estate is truly very much to be desired: towards it all solitaries must tend. But they have a body: they have a limited mind, which cannot long remain fixed upon one

object. . . . Their will itself is so little stable that it must from time to time change its direction and its movement to avoid disgust. As the body has need to take relaxation and recreation, in just the same way the intellect and the will have need to diversify their application sometimes not to fatigue them too much. . . . The head also cannot bear such application, without risk of splitting."

As conclusion, hear his *cri du coeur*: "What more innocent means of relaxing than study?"

Is it not charming, altogether radiant with good sense and humanity? And how well he has seized the *proton pseudos* of his opponent. He had already said it at the beginning of the book:

"The idea he has of monastic perfection makes him doubtless consider this state as a metaphysical state, whose nature consists in one indivisible point, which is the exact and literal observance of the rule."

His delicious *bonhomie* enables him to express the whole thing:

"But after all, whatever drawbacks there may be for solitaries in study, there are no less in ignorance. One of the first and worst is stupidity, which renders them incapable of profiting by reading: unless they have much aptitude of mind—which rarely happens with solitaries, whose point is easily blunted by the solitude and the silence.

"From this distaste for reading issues a distaste for recollection and a sort of necessity to be occupied only with corporal work, capable of making artisans, but not spiritual and interior men. . . . This lack of spirituality renders them indocile, unmanageable, above all when there is some asperity of temper which has not been polished and softened by letters."

Another *cri du coeur* that: and his defence of critical work is no less whole-hearted.

"Let us then avoid bad criticism but not reject the good. It is necessary everywhere, since it is nothing but the use of good sense and judgment. It is necessary, lest we blindly give credence to false history, superstitious tales, unsubstantial imaginings and unfounded visions, false or dubious miracles, false writings of the Fathers. . . . It is a sort of levity (and hence a moral defect) to believe everything without examination: *Qui credit cito, levis est corde.*

With him it is hard to say where simple good sense ends and irony begins. Perhaps the truth is that there is not much difference between them! In the *Traité*, he had urged as against Rancé's theory the number and richness of ancient monastic libraries. To which the other had replied with a touch of formal logic: "It is not a necessary conclusion to say: There was a great library in such a monastery, therefore they studied there." And he continued: "For one knows that there are in monasteries, libraries of which the monks make no use." This brick-bat did not stagger Mabillon: "That is perhaps only too true," he said; "but was it the intention of those who formed the libraries that no use should be made of them?"

Occasionally there is a hint of malice, but not a drop of venom. M. l'Abbé, he says, would reduce to a half-score the monks of the past—"all saints", by the way—who by their learning have raised the monastic life from relaxation and disorder.

Here and there a scratch in passing: "I do not believe that one can say that the monastic order is generally decadent. God still has servants, and faithful servants, in

the cloisters and it must not be thought that the sun of justice shines only upon one spot."

Here his learning points the malice—for there had been Rancés in the Middle Ages—*Nusquam arbitreris lucere solem communem diei nisi in cella tua: nusquam esse serenum, nisi penes te; nusquam operari gratiam Dei nisi in conscientia tua.* For us, the unlearned multitude, these old texts, caressed by Mabillon with a sort of learned voluptuousness, add much charm to the book.

It was first of all to his own monks of La Trappe that Rancé presented his satiric picture of the other religious houses. "Even though these scandals charged against us," writes Mabillon, "were as real and true as they appear in his *Réponse*, I do not see of what use it could be to expose them before the eyes of a community to whose interest it might well be not to think themselves so strongly distinguished from the others; or rather to display them before the eyes of the world, which is already not disposed to judge monks favourably."

There were no real monks save at La Trappe. Everything happened as though Rancé could not tolerate without anger the thought that any abbey should be admired but his. He could not forgive the Carthusians their renown for sanctity or the Benedictines their prestige for learning. Their folios were a torment to him; hence that positive fury of desire to exterminate learning, and even more to befoul it. He said once that if they studied at Saint-Maur, it was in order to gain therefrom a glory which La Trappe only sought from virtue. "What at present causes the monks to plunge into study, is but to find in learning some distinction, no longer having any by the exactitude of their discipline, or by the regularity and sanctity of their

lives." Among so great a host of wild words, this would be not the least irritating, if the Abbot of La Trappe had been responsible for what he said. Mabillon replies quite gently: "No, study is not so dangerous to humility as you might think." And who could speak with more right than he?

" No one is more disposed to this virtue than he who knows himself best and is most convinced that what he knows amounts to very little. Those who are truly scholars know both these things better than anyone, and are in consequence more disposed to the humility of heart which makes true humility. That is not less true of quite average learning "—of the learning, he means, with which the immense majority of the Maurists were content, and which, incidentally, was all that was asked of our five escapees. " Of one hundred and eighty monasteries which compose the congregation of Saint-Maur, there are only about twenty destined for common studies, and one or two for special studies."

" It is sometimes easier to preserve humility in learning, which mixes us with many unestimable men . . . than in a contempt for learning, which is treated as an angelic quality. By the one, you see yourself on a level with many men. By the other you regard yourself as above all men—particularly other monks. Guillaume de Saint-Amour had already raised this objection to the mendicant orders . . . St Thomas replies . . . that after all there is likewise reason to fear vanity in good works, but that is no reason for denying ourself the exercise thereof."

Seeing himself in a tight corner by reason of the services which monks have rendered to the Church by their doctrine and their writings, Rancé had cancelled out " with a stroke of the pen, all these services "—utterly negligible, according

to him, by comparison with " the damage monks have caused to the Church by the abuse they have made of learning." And orchestrating his thought, with that thunderous force of affirmation which intoxicated the man himself and always impressed the simple-minded:

" There is no one who is not agreed ", he had written, " that it would have availed more for the Glory of the Church, for the peace and sanctification of her children, if they [the learned monks] had remained forgotten, in the obscurity of their cloisters, and had been wrapped in perpetual silence."

Of two things one—either he did not understand what he said, or he was raving. We can only sympathise with Mabillon, thus obliged to teach M. de Rancé the names of so many incomparable doctors given to the Church by the monastic state, from St Basil to St Bernard. What was the use—since all the great heresies came from the cloisters. If study had been forbidden to the monk Luther, so Rancé reasoned, the speech and writings of that demon would not have rent the Church asunder. And still Mabillon's patience and gentleness survived the strain.

" Finally ", he writes, " we must come to the matter of Luther—*yes*, *Luther*—who is put down to our account with all his adherents, though no one of them was of our Order. Even that would be little, if we were not also charged with all the calamitous consequences which the author of the *Réponse* attributes to these heresies: particularly with that deplorable state in which we see the world today—to wit the universal conspiracy against this great monarch. . . ." Yes—Louis XIV's name had somehow or other been dragged into the debate by Rancé's eloquence; it had a certain sensation-value! But Saint-Maur responsible for

the wars of that time, and responsible because its monks did not take a vow of ignorance! Mabillon tosses aside this insinuation, odious had it not been so utterly ludicrous, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I hope everyone will be convinced that we have no more part in the present agitations of Europe than the monks of La Trappe."

Not that he tries to clear heresy of its share in the war: "Calvin doubtless is as much to blame as Luther. Would it therefore be just to throw the responsibility on to the clergy? What Order, what state of life would be immune from insults of this sort were it permissible to take occasion to dishonour them from the disorders of a few individuals? And why must our Order, which has so generously resisted heresy in Germany, in England and in France, where several monks have been sacrificed to the rage of the heretics, have the confusion of seeing itself charged with this opprobrium by a person all of whose words are like so many oracles in the world? We rejoice at the faith men have in these words of life; but we are constrained to protest against those which are a wound and a stain upon our Order, upon the whole Monastic Order, and upon Orders whose interests must be dear to us by reason of the common bond of charity which should unite us all. *Unum ordinem opere teneo, caeteros caritate!*"

After such pages—and they abound in the *Reflexions*—I beg that someone—anyone—will explain to me—not the imperturbable self-confidence which makes the abbé flatter himself he has crushed so invincible a foe—but the puzzling neutrality observed by otherwise serious historians: to say nothing of those who, pitying the anæmic *Réflexions*, give the palm to the *Réponse*. The least one can say is that none of them has read Mabillon—or even Rancé.

Among these perilous studies, there was one which inspired in the Abbot of La Trappe a particular repugnance —the reading of the Old Testament. According to him, the early Fathers would have permitted this reading "only with more reserve and more precautions than they did," if they had "pierced into the future and had seen that it must be the ruin of the monastic order." Let me pause a few moments on this new oddity. It bears examination no more than the others, but it enables us to get a kind of action-picture of the birth and fermentation of a lyrical anathema in the half-darkness of Rancé's mind.

"The lawlessness of monks, had it been known [to the early Fathers] would have moved them powerfully not to expose so many holy truths [the Old Testament] to such wicked jests, unseemly happenings, evil tales, licentious interpretations, profane and malignant applications, unworthy of the Holiness of the Spirit which dictated them; and not to give excuse to an almost countless multitude of dissolute persons to authorise their libertinism and their excesses."

"This awful picture," admits Mabillon, "if it were true", should be "an object of horror" to everyone. What! in holy places, so many abominable profanations, "libertinism", "excesses". "What crimes may not be included under these last words, which say all that one can think, without saying anything in particular. . . . Is it possible that excesses so crying should only get themselves heard at La Trappe? If they are hidden—though how *could* they be, if they are really so common—why set heaven and earth blushing with them? Have the superiors been informed? Has one made as close a study as the importance of the matter merited, before making oneself the accuser?

Sodom, even Sodom, was not punished . . . till God Himself had made a species of descent to examine the detail and the truth."

There could be no reply to these spirited questions. Rancé was caught red-handed, so to say. Yet his flaming charge-sheet was not forged in all its parts. Rancé—we know he was "dead", of course, and that news never reached him—had made his enquiries as to the monks of Saint-Maur. He had his *dossiers*—a threat in reserve—to be used at need. Take care, Père Mabillon.

But Mabillon knew, as well as we, how that fire had been lit:

"Some irresponsible person", he continued, "a deserter [from Saint-Maur], to give some colour to his desertion, may perhaps have made some report of a word which fell from some indiscreet monk . . . he makes a monster of it. He is believed . . . zeal has taken flame upon this evidence and thus seen ground for so atrocious an accusation, in which a countless multitude of innocent men are lumped together with perhaps one or two guilty. But no, Reverend Father: do not believe it. Things are not as they have been depicted. Every day Holy Scripture is read in our monastery with the respect which is due to those divine books. . . ."

You see the fermentation and the absurd microbe which started the process. All the Maurists were not like the high-souled Mabillon who was fundamentally simple and in any case had not been subjected to the refining influence of the Hôtel de Rambouillet. We know that there were among them some of a more robust sort, excellent religious, be it noted, but men to whom a broad jest did not come amiss. For a variety of reasons which I need not give here, the old Orders were "vaccinated" more than the

moderns against the prim and the prudish. In a vigorous study on Rabelais as a Franciscan, M. Gilson shows clearly that joviality of the pot-house order is not necessarily a sign of licentiousness in action—not even the joviality of a Rabelais, much less that of the three or four Maurists directly aimed at by Rancé's philippic. Among the jokes of more than doubtful taste affected by them, the irreverent use of scriptural texts would certainly hold a place. Rancé's informants, themselves Maurists, and therefore not likely to cause any restraint to the tongues of their brethren, knew the sort of fuel to kindle the worthy abbot's fire. They would report to him, with some little exaggeration both of the number and the horror, some Biblical puns—"wicked jests . . . unseemly happenings . . . licentious interpretations." Plunge this refuse into the saucepan of La Trappe, add the requisite dose of venom and four full measures of rhetoric: serve hot and you have the *Réponse*. "Neither harshness nor bitterness," calmly writes Dubois; "but a wise cool discussion, a conflict in charity to the profit of truth."

Other particular facts, by which he thought to prove Saint-Maur's advanced state of decay, reached Rancé by the same channel. If we were dealing with a mere lampooner, we should pass over with contempt both the information supplied him, and the "frightful" consequences he drew from it. "But the greater and more considerable in the world are the authority and reputation so justly acquired by the abbé . . . the greater and deeper is the wound he inflicts upon our Congregation by his writings; and it will give us much trouble to convince, not only those who esteem and love it, but still more posterity that what he has said of our Congregation is not precisely true nor general,

and that he has not certain knowledge of it. Yet on what is this knowledge founded? I have already said: on the report of three or four irresponsibles, who will have conveyed to him whatever they thought suitable to give some colour to their desertion and their inconstancy: and perhaps also on a few letters surreptitiously written to him by a few malcontents. On that he finds it necessary to lay a written charge publicly against a whole Congregation. . . . Truly I am sorry to be compelled to reveal all these things; but there would be ground for supposing that I was in agreement, if I said no word; and the love I am bound to have for a body of which I have the happiness to be a member, obliges me to sustain its honour, while sparing, so far as possible, that of the abbot of La Trappe, which is as dear to me and as precious as to any man in the world."

Conversing one day about this time with Mabillon, the comte du Charmel, who was devoted to Rancé, attempted "to justify the abbé on his intentions and on the letters which several monks had written him to persuade him to publish what he had set forth. Dom Mabillon modestly replied that, if he had chosen to listen to all that had been said to him of La Trappe and to receive the memoirs of a religious of that house which had been offered to him, it would have been easy to retort in kind upon the abbé, but that he would always close his ears and his heart to people of that sort. 'Why then', replied M. du Charmel heatedly, 'there must be a rogue concealed at La Trappe, for everything there breathes sanctity, as I have seen!' 'Alas, sir!' said Dom Mabillon, 'it is the same with us: it was the same in the apostolic body.'"

But why prolong an unnecessary discussion. Mabillon has spoken. The cause is finished.

The last page of the *Réflexions* is still finer, more moving and more convincing than all the rest. I have tried, he said, to observe "all the rules of moderation, but I would not dare to flatter myself that nothing contrary to that has escaped me or that I have shown my most pure and upright intentions. I even fear lest some may believe that I have desired to pay back the abbé in his own coin. God who sees the dispositions of my heart knows that there is nothing further from my purpose and my thought. *But men do not see the heart.*"

The sublimest eloquence could say no more than that simple line.

"What then can I do, save expose my thoughts to them in this writing, and my heart to God by the sincerity of the charity which I have for him whom I am compelled to refute? *Quid faciam non invenio, nisi ut inspiciendum tibi sermonem meum offeram, animum Deo.* Why cannot you see my heart, Reverend Father (for permit me to address these words to you at the end of this work), that you may know the dispositions in which I am towards your person and your house. I respect the practices observed there, and I am very far from disapproving the line you pursue with your religious in the matter of studies. But if you think them strong enough to do without studies, do not take from others a help of which they have need. Pardon me if I have spoken with some sort of liberty, and be persuaded that I have not done so from any design of wounding you, but from the sole necessity of defending ourselves . . . *potes considerare quantum mihi respondendi necessitatem imposueris.*"

I quote this last passage, less for its beauty than because it fixes once more the real character of all this controversy.

For Mabillon, it was important of course to vindicate monastic studies, but first to vindicate the honour of his Order. An action for libel, we have called it, and rightly. The innocent but by no means inoffensive cleverness of Rancé's eulogists has gone to the suppression of this evidence. It is thus that little by little men have come to see in the author of the *Sainteté et des Devoirs*, the *Eclaircissements*, the *Réponses*, only a Doctor proclaiming in the face of the world the sublime principles which dictated his reform.

"The abbé de Rancé", writes Sainte-Beuve, "has more than all [Mabillon and his partisans] a peak by which he surpasses them and which they have not rightly measured." There is a sense in which that may be said, since after all men have a right, if they will, to raise the quite pointless question whether intellectual labour is or is not advantageous to the development of the interior life in monks. What however is *not* said is that Rancé is here in action not as a Doctor but as a pamphleteer. Even before Mabillon had opened his mouth, Rancé's cause was lost, at least before the tribunal of Natural Law and the Gospel. Etna is a peak, like Mont Blanc, but a peak from which torrents of lava sometimes flow: we may admire it for its altitude, but scarcely for its lava!

Contemporaries for the most part held this opinion, excepting of course those who, like Bossuet, were already attached to Rancé's side. One of the abbé's nieces, Louise-Henriette d'Albon, a visitandine at Riom, wrote to M. Favier to ask for the complete text of the *Sainteté et des Devoirs:* "My saintly uncle . . . speaks to me of his books as being not yet printed. I have learnt from one who comes from Paris that what delays the printing is that the bishops who

approve have found something too strong in these books, likely to embitter the mind of the monks. Some have written to my uncle to urge him to soften these places. For me, my pleasure would be to see these books before such correction. The vehemence of this saintly man does not at all displease me." You recognise the Bouthillier blood—and you do not make the mistake of asking this amazon what the founder of her Order would have thought of her uncle.

Some rallied to the support of the abbé's thesis on studies —among them, oddly enough, the very learned Dom de Vert; but he was not of Saint-Maur and perhaps he was not sorry to have a hit at Mabillon. "*Petulantissimam responsionem; acerbissimam insectationem*," wrote the Maurists of Rome. Arnauld, who was not personally interested and had always wished to conciliate Rancé, yet dared not declare for him. Let him, he said, make for his own house all the rules he pleases, "but to claim that his conduct must serve as a rule for other religious does not seem to me just."

The cautious Nicole wrote to Arnauld in 1692 about Rancé's *Réponse*: "I am amazed at the confidence of him whose book you have read. He has a lordly contempt for his adversaries. He has not the slightest scruple for having stirred up so great a business, which is producing much bitterness among four thousand monks. He has not the least distrust of his reasons. He thinks he will win the field without any difficulty. He sees nothing more necessary than his book and, for my part, I am convinced that there never was anything more useless. There are not forty monks in the congregation he attacks who pursue a life of study, and those who do so are the most exact of all

in the greater part of the monastic duties and above all at office."

Finally I shall give the impression of an important personage of the Roman Court, as reported by Dom Germain, a Maurist and doubtless a very keen one, but thoroughly worthy of belief. The prelate in question, who was in touch with everything and everyone, " has said that before M. de la Trappe had written, he esteemed him greatly; that, when his first book appeared, it much diminished the esteem he had for his person; and finally that when his defence was published, he lost almost all the favourable opinion he had had of him. This prelate knows the insult done to us by M. de la Trappe; he knows still better our innocence, and he repeated something once said by Cardinal Bona: 'The fervour of this abbé seems to have in it a certain frenzy'."

As for the controversy, it straightened out as of itself and in the most Christian manner imaginable. Mabillon's conscience was a little uneasy. His *Réflexions* weighed upon him. Finally, under strong urging from the Duchesse de Guise, he came to La Trappe.

" I spoke with M. l'abbé ", he writes, " four times—the first time without saying one word of our disputation; the second, he began by saying that he did not know if we should not have been angry at what he had written against me; at these words, I embraced him and he me, both of us on our knees, and I answered him that his book had in no wise diminished the respect and veneration I felt towards him. He added that when one was penetrated by a particular truth, one sometimes said things rather warmly, but that he begged me to be assured that he felt towards our Congregation, and

towards me especially, all possible sentiments of esteem and cordiality."

Somewhat distant at first and majestic, Rancé was quickly won over. His warm sensibility got the upper hand. "It is true", he wrote, "that Père Mabillon has given himself the trouble to come and see us; it was no mere ceremony either on his part or on mine, but a truly sincere and cordial interview, and the truth is that it is impossible to be more moved by it than I have been."

He already had his reply to the *Réflexions* prepared, but after Mabillon's visit, he renounced the idea of printing it. He rested content with adding these words to the preface: "When the Reverend Père Mabillon had the charity to come and see me after the publication of the *Réflexions*, I had already replied to this last work by another. But his gentleness and sincerity so won upon my heart that I would not willingly have said a single word on any matter which would have been capable of displeasing him." Yet, on the advice of several people, he did not suppress his manuscript. It would be found in the archives of La Trappe. But, he concludes, "if in the course of time it should happen that my reply becomes public, I am very glad that it should be known that if any expressions are found in it less kindly and less worthy of the consideration and esteem I have for Père Mabillon, I disavow them and change them into others which mark quite contrary dispositions. At bottom I have always had respect and charity for him."

So he too moves us by his generosity, and perhaps even more by his weakness. For it really *is* a considerable thing for him, this halting apology, this inadequate with-

drawal: do not ask more of him. It would be cruel to force Rancé to prolong and push deeper that fleeting examination of conscience made easy by his meeting with humility and gentleness. A shining miracle of grace—the abbé pardoned Mabillon!

## Chapter VIII

## THE ASSAULT ON THE GRANDE CHARTREUSE

Reverently retouched by the indulgence of the biographers, the account of the famous quarrel we have just related, far from dimming the abbé's legendary halo, has actually added new and brilliant rays. Is it not glory for a simple *amateur*, a man who for thirty years had professed to have no truck with learning, thus to have stood up to one of the giants of modern scholarship?—and so brilliantly that the very least one can say for him is that the result of the combat remained in doubt. As men very quickly got on the wrong scent as to the real point at issue, and as, besides, two great churchmen were at grips, it is altogether natural that, to cover up the scandal of such a dispute, it was agreed to admit that they were both right—Mabillon to maintain the necessity of monastic studies, Rancé to abjure at the foot of the Cross the pomps and delights of learning. In any case the two systems were easy enough to harmonise in practice, opposed as they might seem in the abstract. So that all would have been for the best in the best of all possible religious worlds if an interfering busy-body, one Dom Innocent Le Masson, had not come forward—publicly and not at all quietly—to place before the Christian conscience the real problem—or rather the many and very serious problems—raised by the Abbot of La Trappe's impassioned assaults upon the whole monastic Order.

So completely is this latest adversary forgotten today, that

we might imagine that Rancé could easily have swallowed him whole. We could not make a greater mistake. General of the Carthusians—with nearly two hundred houses under his control—and as such guardian and official interpreter of the age-hallowed tradition of the only one of the ancient orders which has never really known relaxation or decline, Dom Innocent too was a sort of giant and was for many reasons more formidable than the gentle Maurist.

He was deeply learned in his own special field, for he had just published "a new collection of the Statutes of his Order, with very careful notes to throw light on difficulties." In addition he was a spiritual guide of the first merit, one of the surest and most penetrating exponents at that day of the mysticism of St Francis de Sales, and therefore more capable than Mabillon of evaluating Rancé's actual doctrine in its essence and in its totality. Mabillon took the offensive but rarely: for the most part, desolated at the mere necessity of self-defence, he sighs and pleads. *Sponte favos, aegre spicula:* and even his sting was soaked in honey. But Le Masson boldly took the bull by the horns: a direct frontal attack, despising caution. He called a spade a spade, and Rancé a—we shall see. He did not fear him: and if he venerated him, he did not show it: rather he seemed to look upon him with glum suspicion. All this parade of austerity left him unmoved: he scented in it some sort of mystification—what he would have called a bluff, had he known American. More than once he hinted that in all this discussion Rancé was a sort of catspaw for some mysterious faction—probably the Jansenists. "There is some other design", he said, "which all this somehow serves . . . we shall see it openly" some day. Later Dom Guéranger thought so too:

for my part, the documents do not allow me to follow them so far.

The book *De la Sainteté et des Devoirs monastiques* had aroused in many Carthusians the same agitation, followed by the same results, as elsewhere. Several, in their exaltation, had no thought but to flee from their contemned observance to enter at La Trappe. Asking his General for permission to carry out this fine project, one young Carthusian said: "It is very certain that the religious state at La Trappe is the most perfect that there is in the Church of God." The General was piqued at this, Dubois tells us, and "a little jealousy" came to poison this first wound. But pray, do not be shocked: "the greatest and most saintly souls have not been exempt from it"—with the single exception of course of the abbé de Rancé. *Was* he "piqued"? or "jealous"? We know not. But very much moved, certainly. And with good reason. Upon a re-reading, Le Masson wrote later, "I perceive that I grew rather heated. But you must know that, since the publication of his books, I have come across many recalcitrants who, after laughing at all warnings, have ended by apostatising. All that they have to allege is what M. de la Trappe says of our order. They threatened me with him alone: and two impudent apostates wanted to take me to law. One of these apostates"—this explains the suspicions mentioned above—"acts in Rome as an emissary, a spy and an agent . . . of the good friends of the late Bishop of Ypres who are in France."

And in another place: "One unruly youth, with a smattering of the new doctrine of Jansenius, who therefore thinks himself not obliged to do anything save when resistless grace carries him on by an insurmountable

pleasure . . . is quite in love with the Reform at La Trappe and boasts of wanting to go there. . . . I am holding ready the cage where the bad birds are kept." And again, M. de la Trappe " forces us to speak more freely of him than we would wish, by the necessity he imposes upon us of instructing and of lifting from anxiety those whom his book has cast down."

Further, the abbé had his informants in the place. Where had he not? Lenain quotes one of the letters in which a certain Carthusian complained to Rancé both of the Order and the General. Dubois may say what he likes: he would be alone today in finding this sort of connivance at disaffection " truly Catholic ". If Dom Le Masson had not tried to put a stop to it, he would have failed in his duty. He wrote, therefore, " two long letters to a visitor of his Order and had them circulated in all the monasteries, to forbid Carthusians to read the *Devoirs monastiques*. The visitor took it upon himself to execute these orders with such strenuous zeal, that in one of his visits he went so far as to burn some notes extracted from the book by the monks for their own private edification." It may be that his zeal ran away with him. Dubois at any rate gets quite livid with rage about it: but surely he knew that neither the *Traité* nor the *Réflexions* of Mabillon could pass the customs at La Trappe!

As for Rancé, he reared violently at this unexpected resistance. Let these good Fathers not push me too far, he wrote: " It would be a calamitous thing for them if they forced me in my own despite to justify myself." " It is true ", said the General, " I have had his book withdrawn from our cloisters. . . . But has the abbé any right to enter into the secrets and the reasons of our government?

Would he be pleased if I sought spies to enter into the secrets of the conduct of his house and to draw from them matter for invective against him, as he claims to have a right to do against us? Would he have his book held more in honour than the sacred Scriptures? Yet how many people are forbidden to read them! Let this worthy abbé remain in peace and leave us so."

Nevertheless Le Masson published "a new explanation of the Statutes of his Order (1687), and said openly in the preface that one of the principal reasons which had determined him to compose this work had been the obligation under which he had found himself of refuting those who argued that the observances of the Carthusians had grown lax in the course of time." Perhaps he would have been better advised to make no allusion to Rancé's recent attacks and to let a sleeping cat lie—though, to be sure, it slept with one eye open. However that may be, the abbé could no longer hold himself in. His arsenal was well furnished, his pickets in rank, his powder not only dry but impatient! Soon copies of his *Lettre à un évêque pour répondre aux difficultés de Dom Innocent Le Masson* were passing from hand to hand, surreptitiously but in great numbers. This pamphlet—for that is what it was—and as violent as most of its sort—was not printed till later (*Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, 1710). Likewise unpublished was the General's reply: *Explication de quelques endroits des anciens statuts de l'Ordre des Chartreux avec des éclaircissements sur le sujet d'un libelle qui a été composé contre l'Ordre et qui s'est divulgué secrètement* (1689). I have already said that, for all Le Masson's rank, he was obstinately refused permission to publish his reply. He had to rest content with getting a handful of copies printed clandestinely,

intended for a few close friends and for the principal houses of the Order. In 1709, when Richard Simon examined it in his *Bibliothèque critique*, it was already very rare, and today, of course, it is even more so. It was, therefore, with some emotion that I held in my hand this quarto volume, roughly printed and bound. It reminded me of Fénelon's replies to Bossuet, pulled off in haste in a cellar, under the threat of a police raid. Yet it is a work of some importance. "It may be said", writes the critical Richard Simon, "that it is a good book and that it replies solidly to the manuscript pamphlet of the abbot of La Trappe, which was being circulated under the robe. The General, though very old"—in fact he was only sixty-one—"seems in truth somewhat too vigorous, and he has even brought into relief certain passages of the abbot which could have been softened; but after all, the abbot, by his unmeasured outbursts, not only against the Carthusians, but in general against the whole monastic order, brought this reply upon himself." "It seems," he had said earlier, "that the famous abbot of La Trappe, in the works he gave to the public, took pleasure in decrying other monks, to increase the value of his new reform. . . . He had set himself up as the reformer of the whole monastic order and wished that all monks should conform to his ideas." And again: "This book of the General of the Carthusians is *foudroyant* against the abbot of La Trappe." It is true that Rancé's pamphlet "is very well written. . . . One can find nothing more ingenious or more subtle than the method he adopts . . . to clear himself of the slander of which he was accused." "The General has not the same ingenuity or subtlety, but he is strong in reasoning and in arguments on the facts. He brings evidence to show that the abbot—

has certainly uttered things that were false." Le Masson did not question the literary merit of the pamphlet. "If this book were written in Latin", he said, "several things in it would be more tolerable. . . . But it is written in French, in a careful polished style, such that had the members of the *Académie française* corrected it, it would not have been better written. This is a means of suiting it to the taste of everyone, of attracting men and women in the world . . . to read it through curiosity, and of giving pious people . . . the occasion of entering into different ideas, which will issue in unsettlement of mind or contempt of the ordinary way of spirituality; to the upsetting of convents of women and the ultimate contempt for the whole monastic state."

The General may not be a great stylist: but you cannot say he writes ill. He makes us read him, holds us, is never wearisome. He has substance—not more than Mabillon, but far more than Rancé, who is no more than a passably brilliant rhetorician. All three give us pleasure. But Le Masson, less polished than Mabillon, but more direct, more vital, less heavy—and as worthy a soul—was by no means the worst equipped of the three for writing. He lacked only the art—and a man can do without that who has the—I scarcely know what to call it—the touch, perhaps. It is not from books that he quarries the phrases he wants. Thus he writes: "Before he finishes the abbot will be coming along and picking up the stones of our desert to hurl them at our heads": or again, "He is going to poke about in the sweepings of our house." And this homeliness is all the more piquant by contrast with the studied grandiloquence of the other.

"The author of this pamphlet speaks in a manner cal-

culated to give an air of moderation, but when you have once seen what is hidden *under the down*, you will not be surprised at seeing me reply with a certain warmth. This author, on his own showing, has a just grievance! He has damaged the reputation of an entire Order . . . but because the blow has been partially warded off and he has not had all the effect he designed he thinks it would be an injustice to his own reputation if he did not try to destroy that of the Order entirely. . . . It is as though the author said in so many words: 'I have beaten them: they complain. I must finish them.'"

A better philosopher than Mabillon (and *a fortiori* than Rancé, who never got to the heart of anything) the General, instead of wandering about with the other two in the thickets of erudition, went straight to first principles. Rancé held the monastic rules as unalterable: fixed once for all by the founder, to be observed with rigid literalness for all time. The slightest deviation spells decadence. This truly Judaic conception Dom Innocent flips aside:

"I cannot . . . agree with his statement that the rules of religious observance must be considered as laws written by the finger of God. For that contains an exaggeration, comparing to the laws of God, which are immutable, laws which have taken their origin only in the liberty and piety of early Christians. Human enterprises, which cannot be so perfect that they are not subject to defects and to more or less of error which experience brings to light and shows men how to correct. . . . All that comes from men is subject to error and to the necessity of change or correction according to the circumstances of the time and the other conditions which are necessary that human laws may be

just and may be able to conserve the quality of laws actually operative."

Thus, for example, the Carthusians of the seventeenth century had in some measure mitigated the abstinence of their first founders. Was that a sign of decadence? Assuredly not. "For I am convinced . . . that the bodily strength and the habits of those times were so different from those of our day that they had no more difficulty in supporting their abstinences than we in practising ours. . . . It would be intolerable stubbornness if, in things which are of human institution, one chose to adhere so closely to the letter of a constitution as to be unwilling to give up any of it."

Even our abbé, after all, has "relaxed . . . some of its first rigours? For which we in no way blame him. . . ." The first Fathers had themselves *bled* five times a year. "What should we do now if we observed the same thing? We should kill almost as many monks as enter the Order, and we scarcely dare let a monk be bled. . . . Yet our first Fathers lived eighty, ninety, a hundred years, and their bones, which we still keep for veneration at the Chartreuse, are like bones of giants in comparison with ours." The abbé replies "that one comes to the monastery not to live but to die. He applies to monks what happens to soldiers who die in battle. He wants them to be like martyrs. I leave you to judge . . . if the comparison he draws from the example of soldiers and martyrs squares well with monastic observance, and if an obstinate attachment to these marvels can take precedence over the rules of the natural law. I do not at all agree that one can so renounce the rules of discretion in what concerns corporal needs as to have no regard to the ruin of health . . . nor

do I agree . . . that one must take austerities, considering them as means of shortening life and impairing health to the point of losing it altogether."

Nor was the historian and the critic less penetrating in him than the philosopher. Rancé's comparison of the ideal perfection of a quite imaginary golden age with the evils of the present time was easy enough: but—" Can men be exempt from falling into faults and when they have so fallen can we declare that there is universal decadence . . .? Why does he say nothing of the weakness, sinfulness, human failings which happened among the ancients? He wishes to make the present monastic state as hideous as he can, and, to this end, he puts on the one side in the clearest light . . . what has been written of the early anchorites; he exaggerates everything to transform them into angels; he covers up all their faults. . . . But, if he had lived in their time and had spied upon their conduct and peered into the folds of their robe—as he has done with the Carthusians—he would have considerably modified his ideas."

Not that the General was so imprudent as to neglect to make answer about the scandalous abuses piled together by the abbé in his pamphlet. There was, of course, nothing to trouble him in this minutely detailed indictment—or rather this futile mass of tittle-tattle. Rancé's spies were even stupider than they were wicked. Thus he accuses the Grande Chartreuse of not treating *the pilgrims' horses* according to the laws of Christian hospitality. They should have undertaken the feeding of them and they did not! " What should we do now that we count five or six thousand travellers a year, and occasionally more, some of them bringing with them fifteen or twenty horses!

We could only give up the effort, and so we have been compelled to have a hostelry built at the bridge."

It was reported to Rancé, and by him affirmed, that the Carthusians slept too long. "Our vigils", replies the General, "are much more severe than they were formerly. Our sleeping-time is now divided into two, and that of our predecessors had not this interruption. The author well knows that in addition they slept during the day, and he says no word of it! The first Carthusians were seven hours in bed, and sometimes eight, at a stretch. How then is any favour shown to those of the present day, who are only four hours in bed before matins, in allowing them to go back to bed for three hours after matins? . . . Which is the more rigorous, to be in bed seven hours continuously, or to be in bed seven hours in two divisions? It is surely a case of wishing to make everything into a crime."

But how follow the great Abbot in his tour of inspection? The bread, the fish, the beds—nothing was overlooked and nothing was found satisfactory. But I must hasten on to the most carefully polished and re-polished page of his pamphlet:

"What reflexions could one not make on the change so recently come over the Grande Chartreuse! Those awful places to which holy men had withdrawn, as within inaccessible ramparts: those places which made profound impressions on the hardest hearts, which one could not see without being filled with sacred horror; those steep rocks thronging one upon another, which seemed to have been put there by divine Providence as so many barriers or bulwarks to prevent entry, and which one could not undertake to force without perishing"—he means, apparently, that only dead men got there!—"That habitation, in

short, so apt to excite piety . . . is no longer what it was. The roads are levelled; all the ways to it are open, as if those whom it had wished to hide in the secret of its face had now as much desire to show themselves again to the world as it had to separate them from it. Is there anything which more certainly shows that this arrangement has not been caused in that solitude by the same spirit which once reigned there and that the children have not followed therein the footsteps of their fathers?

"It is a thought which is confirmed by the state in which everyone knows that Chartreuse now stands, which, after having been reduced to ashes, from poor and simple as it was, has become pompous and proud in the magnificence of its cells and its buildings. But truly if this house, which one may justly style new, has more refinement, more orderly arrangement, more exterior beauty than the first, we may affirm that it has neither its glory nor its splendour nor its edification, and that not in it have we seen the fulfilment of those words of the Prophet: *Magna erit gloria domus istius novissimae plus quam primae.*"

Say what you will: however bad the taste that this page cannot fail to leave in the mouth of decent men, we have to admit that, in spite of a certain bombast, as an indictment it is thoroughly workmanlike. Boiled down, it means that the abbé is denouncing two scandals which of themselves would suffice to make clear the present decadence of the Carthusians: one—thanks to the road which Dom Le Masson had had built, the Grande Chartreuse had become easier to get at; two—the same General had built, on the ashes of the old monastery, a sort of Chartreuse *de luxe*, a second Versailles.

And now for the General:

" Chartreuse has been burnt eight times, and this last time it was burnt to the ground. We were constrained of necessity, after such disastrous experiences, to rebuild it all anew and to cover it with slate, having no other means to preserve us from another fire. Our roads were very dangerous: all my predecessors have done what they could to render them safer and more convenient, in order that men and animals should be in no danger of falling headlong. I have completed what they began. . . . From all that the author says I appeal then to honourable men who have seen what has been done here, and I leave them to judge both of the sense of justice and the designs that he can have in making use of any stone to hurl at us. In our building we have secured solidity, suitability and order—nothing else. And what he says of our cells is at variance with truth, and that magnificence which he attributes to them is a consequence of his false imaginings. All that truth constrains me to avow here is that I think that no defamation of the Order could be made more studied, more finished, more calculated to penetrate the minds of men . . . and less reparable, than the author makes in this pamphlet."

Ah! this victim of calumny can safely leave the tricks of rhetorical sophistry to his opponent. He does not even quote scripture. A defect perhaps: we might wish him more vibrant: but we should be wrong. After all the contrast between the two styles is almost enough of itself.

There remains perhaps one thing uglier. " The Carthusians," Rancé tells us, " formerly worked in the morning and after dinner. This regularity is no longer observed, and even their garden, small as it is, they now have tended by the hands of outsiders."

Another calumny: " This research which he has carried

even into every monk's little garden shows a strange curiosity, a surprising avidity to learn what is happening in our monasteries. But in this truth is disregarded: for, with the exception of a few good old monks, who are sometimes given help in doing their gardens, all the others do theirs themselves. Judge . . . whether it was of great importance that the public should be instructed upon all this! But he could omit nothing that might portray us and make the Order appear as what the author pleased."

If Mme. de Montbazon had still been there, and had been following this quarrel, she might well have said to her friend: "What charming tricks you get up to now that you are a saint!"

As we can see, our General, though sharper than Mabillon, is still moderate enough. His dominant feeling is less anger than an almost contemptuous amazement: "I cannot understand by what reasoning a man of piety like him can have been able to believe that, without damage to charity, he could bring into public view the deficiencies of our Order." "We see in this that the author finds it hard to bear that anyone should have a high opinion of us." "We ask the author in virtue of what does he take leave to make himself, as it were, absolute master of his neighbour's reputation?" (Dom Innocent naturally did not know Caulaincourt's pleasing *mot* about Napoleon: "He has often made me wonder whether sovereigns can have a neighbour.") As to humility, it had gone—heaven knows where—wherever charity had gone. His book is "a product of spiritual intoxication, a monument erected to his own opinion, establishing it as spiritual judge of the Monastic Orders, all of whose usages he would wish to conform to his own ideas." And again: "The decadence

of the monks is denounced and portrayed in such fashion that it might be said that that decadence appears as a dark cloud serving to throw into clearer relief the colours in which we see him depict the sublime state of his own monastery!"

What is the explanation of such grotesque behaviour? It may be that the true monastic life remains a closed book to this scourge of monks. "He was superior before he was a novice, and master before he was an apprentice." "Really to know the fatigues and difficulties of war, it is necessary to have been, and remained for a long time, a private soldier."

"He knows obedience only in theory, having always been his own superior. Not knowing then what it is to obey, the private notion he has formed for himself is like a bandage blinding him. He would be very much astonished if he were an inferior—I mean an ordinary religious—and what he says here were exacted from him. But he would learn very quickly to understand aright the words of St Paul: 'He learned obedience by the things which he suffered.'"

It would be impossible to place a finger more precisely on the wound—or, if I may presume to call it so, the original sin, of this altogether unique monk. We did not draw attention to it earlier, when we were setting out the lofty beginnings of his vocation: we did not want to discourage a beginner. This irremovable abbot did not enter by the right door. To the heroic sacrifice he agreed in the beginning to make, it never for one instant occurred to him that he ought to add one more—the absolute renunciation of the prelacy which he held from the king and not from the Church. It was purely of his own good-will that from abbot commendatory he became real abbot:

he accepted the degrading status of monk, and in doing that he acted finely: but he kept, as a privilege inalienable and attached to his own person, the right to command the other monks and to give obedience only to himself, not even imagining, as I have said, that in the new life he was embracing, he might possibly be a subordinate. I do not know what canonists think of such an anomaly. There must have been, in their language, some *sanatio in radice*. But from our exclusively psychological point of view, there seems small doubt that Rancé's inner life was more or less stunted as a result of this wrong start. What was he, after all, but a monk who had always done what seemed good to *him*? His reform probably gained by his being accountable to no man but only to God, since he initiated all sorts of splendid novelties that no other would have dared to sanction: but the reformer himself suffered loss. Hence it comes that we do not see him rise like the true saints from virtue to virtue. Rather he descends, or what comes to the same thing, remains stationary. As to the new departures he initiated, much as we admire them, we cannot escape the feeling that they developed in him the craving for power and publicity, the amazing megalomania that we can actually see taking possession of him. I know that in saying this we are still shrinking from the one right word. But I have already pleaded that the one right word —that crude, vigorous word—is not for me, a mere historian, to utter. The General of the Carthusians has rights which I have not.

"The author here sets himself up as God's deputy, *ut evellat et disperdat*. . . . It is he who appoints himself for us . . . to make known [our shame] and to make us realise it. No way seems to him better calculated to make

us realise it than to slander us. He speaks as master and dogmatises, *quasi arrepta virga censoria.*" He quotes him once more and concludes: "I leave you these words to consider, which you will regard, I think, as a species of *supercilium pharisaïcum.*" And elsewhere, alluding to the attacks on the Jesuits made by the Jansenists and by Rancé himself: "We are in an age in which men dispute much on an exact and rigorous theology of morals, but scarcely follow it in practice. There are great discussions on an ambiguous word and many people who seem very hot on these matters speak and act as if that commandment of God had been erased from the Decalogue which forbids rash judgment, detraction and false witness against one's neighbour. *They strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.*"

And if the allusion be not plain enough, he puts it in so many words:

"One may say, with no exaggeration, that there is to be seen in many places [in the pamphlet] something of the air and style of the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not as other men!"

But in truth, and difficult as the task might seem, Le Masson is more concerned to attack the abbé's spiritual doctrine than his person. The abbé, of course, never sets out this doctrine in express terms, but all his writings breathe it unmistakably: and to the General's mind it is nothing but a sort of Judaising *primitivism*—or, in plain words, Pharisaic literalism. I have already said that in this conflict Dom Innocent represents the living spirituality of the Church, as it has been outlined by the Fathers of the Desert and at once humanised and spiritualised by A Kempis and St Francis de Sales, the two masters whom Le Masson places before all others. After a long chain of texts from

the *Imitation*—ten large pages—he writes: Thus you may "contrast the sentiments of that incomparable book with those of the author of this, and sustain your judgment that you be not dazzled and captivated by what has the appearance of something super-eminent." The word "dazzled"—*ébloui* in the sense then given to the word—stresses that false sublimity which is Rancé's chief attraction. The fantastic ideal on which he fed his imagination bursts out in the very first phrase of the *Sainteté et des Devoirs:* The true religious "is a man who having, by a solemn vow, renounced the world and all that is material and perishable, now lives only for God and is now occupied only with eternal things."

Not so, cries the General.

"The definition is exaggerated . . . the most purified souls cannot be exempt, while they live upon the earth, from being subject to thoughts and feelings of affection for things of sense. Such statements . . . are likely, first to disquiet, then to afflict and finally to discourage the best souls, who will take things literally, on the word of the author. If there were only this text, or a very few others . . . one might put upon them a favourable interpretation, but the whole book is full of them. The excuse which the author might give, drawn from the example of some of the ancients, is not acceptable now, any more than if a surgeon today, having beginners to instruct in the art of surgery, wished to teach them what was the practice in the time of Hippocrates. So he would teach them to be cruel to the sick, since at that time no other method was known, say of applying a cautery, than to heat an iron very hot and plunge it into the flesh. . . . To such a surgeon we might well say: How cruel you are . . . since that time they

have found how to apply a cautery in a much easier and more humane way. . . . The saints, and among others [the author of the *Imitation* . . .] and St Francis de Sales, explain in so reasonable a manner . . . all that the spiritual man must know and all that he can and must do . . . they make him understand in a manner which so well accords with right reason, that [he] is easily convinced that all they say is true, very good and quite possible." You, on the contrary, " plunge " men of good will into obscurities and difficulties which terrify them. You say, for example, " that the religious, having become the temple of God, must have Him ceaselessly before his eyes, and can never again be distracted from Him without committing a sort of sacrilege." " I appeal from what he puts forward here to the *Imitation* where he will not find such excesses." " Sacrilege " even is too soft a word for Rancé: " spiritual fornication " is much more to his taste. " This is not true and not practicable. . . . There is no saint who has not lost God from his mind for a single moment, save perhaps the Blessed Virgin. And to describe this single moment's loss of attention as spiritual fornication, is to exaggerate greatly."

This inhuman rhetoric—or rather this grandiloquent parroting—can but turn simple souls from the " smooth, straight, true, reasonable, easy and simple way " traced out by the later saints.

Notice these adjectives, radiant with humanity and sound sense: they celebrate, as it were, the lawful wedlock of true Christian asceticism and right reason. Whereas the abbé with his everlasting exaggerations leads us " under the appearance of a loftier perfection into labyrinths and abysses. And I dare challenge the author himself to escape

despair if he takes things as he says them here and practically throughout his book."

This pretentious façade hides, too, the most rudimentary spirituality, a thoroughly Judaic philosophy of perfection which has, to measure the progress or the decadence of souls, no other rule than exterior practices.

"The interior man is the same as he has always been; his understanding and his will, the order of his reason and his internal sense are still the same. His heart, his affections, his ways of feeling have not changed. It is not here a question of greater austerity, since it is not a question of exterior action at all but of the use the inner man can and must make of himself. Why then wish to offer Hell to worthy souls, by withdrawing them from the right knowledge of their inner self, from the facilities and enlightenment which have been given to them and which they find fully worked out in the incomparable book of the *Imitation* and in the books of St Francis de Sales?"

And again, for he is not afraid to repeat himself:

"Let it be recalled once more that all we are treating at present concerns the use of the soul's faculties . . . and not exterior actions. That is why all the reasons for the austerities of the monks of old which the author claims to revive have no connection with the matter we are discussing here."

Blinded by his literalism, Rancé would say that this doctrine—which is incidentally that of the Gospels—sets a premium upon softness and laxity, and is a sure first sign of decadence. What—he might say—on the pretext that the bones of our fathers were bigger than ours and their stomachs stronger, are we to be dispensed from doing violence to ourselves? For he never under-

stood that there is no violence so harsh as that of the spirit.

"If that discretion which has always been considered in the Order—as also in the Order of St Benedict—one of the principles of its conservation and perseverance, has diminished something of the old-time rigour in abstinence, there have also, in conformity with these old-time texts, been imposed certain things harder than what was then practised, because they have been thought more useful for our spiritual advancement. But I refrain from speaking of them here, lest I open some door to empty self-satisfaction. On the contrary I pass sentence against ourselves in favour of our Fathers of old, and I confess that they were better than we, because they were more detached from the world and from creatures . . . more free from their own judgment and more loyal in the renunciation of all their own will. It is in that that I set their greatest sanctity, and not in the eating of vegetables and the fasting upon bread, water and salt."

And again, more boldly:

"If in our present statutes there is found anything different from our earlier statutes, the better part of what is changed is changed from good to better, and the other lesser part has been proportioned to the quality of the times and the men. . . . If our statutes have nothing in the outer bark that seems as rough as the ancient, they have that which binds the freedom and the will of the animal man more firmly under the yoke of obedience. Self-love holds nothing more precious than self-will and liberty. The more a man destroys self-love the more he enters into the religious spirit . . . the interior spirit, without which neither the new observance nor the old amount to very much."

These are truly memorable words and they have here the value of a manifesto. Against the archaic formalism of Rancé—and many others—they set the primacy of the spirit. Oddly enough, it is likewise by an appeal to the spirit—but considered as a *pis aller!*—that Rancé concludes his pamphlet: "What can we do, you and I, my good Fathers: you are but degenerate Carthusians; and you have now only one single thing to do: you must become saints." So he writes it, magnificently, at his usual altitude:

"There I stop, Monseigneur. . . . In a word, the Carthusians may have the sanctity of their Fathers, though they have neither their penitence nor their austerity, provided that, despite these differences, they preserve charity, which alone forms saints; let them live in their solitudes, filled with the Spirit of God, void of that of the world; let them groan for that original simplicity which they have lost: let them be afflicted to see themselves without that greatest ornament and let them say with the prophet, in the movement of their grief: *Cecidit corona capitis mei.*"

Don't try to understand it. It is nothing but a mass of loud words colliding and contradicting. His brow crowned with the triple tiara, Rancé dismisses with a loud-mouthed and contemptuous blessing the great Order which he has just judged as a Court of last appeal, and so concludes the session.

"There", comments the General, "he stops. He is right, for he could do no worse. He is right also when he says it is not necessary to say more, for he has said and invented all that he is capable of saying and inventing. Yet he strikes one final blow . . . to show us that his will is not lacking ; and then he instructs us as to what we have to do, having pronounced that we have lost the

crown from our head, and utters all those beautiful words which you have before your eyes. May God bless and crown the author!"

So ends Dom Innocent's reply. Richard Simon thought it devastating; and it is probable that, had it not been strangled at birth, all good men would have shared his opinion. As to the abbé, one cannot be sure.

"To satisfy what you call for on the subject of the Carthusians," he writes to one of his friends, "I may tell you that I have not had the least desire to reply to what their General has published against me . . . I have not even wished to read it; they may be assured that I shall preserve in their regard an eternal silence." "He was faithful" adds Dubois, "to this generous"—not to say prudent—"resolution." You will observe that he does not say that he has not read the General but that he has not wished to read him. Thus did the casuists demoralise even their worst enemies!

However that may be, the lesson had not been altogether wasted. Some time later, in 1696, he refused to receive at La Trappe a Carthusian with whom he continued to correspond secretly, the abbé Nicaise acting as a letter-box for both parties. "I should like to be able to do something for the consolation of the worthy Carthusian you speak of," he writes, "but as to receiving him, there is no probability. Rome and France would rise up against me, and I would have no argument wherewith to defend myself . . . as to their General, he has written against me all he has pleased; I have not had any idea of replying to it; his book refutes itself." How did he know, if he had not read it? Then comes the refrain we know so well: "I am long grown

used to the invectives which come upon me from men, and God gives me the grace not to be troubled by them."

I cannot imagine how he could have forgotten to wind up with a Latin tag: *Beati qui persecutionem patiuntur. . . .*

## Chapter IX

# FINAL ASSAULT AND CURFEW

To the moral trials, to the torments of every sort inflicted upon the Abbot of La Trappe during thirty years and more by what we may call his official persecutors—Cistercian,s Jesuits, Benedictines, Carthusians—" God," writes Dom Serrant, " to complete the purifying of his pious servant, added physical sufferings. The rheumatic pains which had begun in 1688 bore with such violence upon his right hand in 1694, that they were several times on the point of amputating it."

" Within a few months," writes Dom Gervaise, " it became monstrous. The dislocated and decaying bones, the relaxed ligaments, the corrupted nerves no longer allowed either movement or action." " Walking had become very painful on account of the swelling of the feet; a rupture, contracted while working in the fields, occasioned frequent attacks of colic; finally an almost incessant cough made night as hard to bear as day." He had to confess himself beaten and " tear himself from the life of the community to retire to the infirmary."

Incapable from now on of carrying out the duties of his office and desirous " of preparing himself solely for the great voyage from which no man returns," he gave in his resignation as abbot in May 1695, and obtained of the king that he might choose his successor from among the monks of La Trappe, or in other words, that his

abbey should not be granted once more to an *abbé commendataire.*

*Abdicat Armandus veniat ne laicus Abbas*

as the abbé Thiers puts it. His choice fell on Dom Zozime, who died a few weeks after his abbatial consecration; then on our old companion Dom Gervaise. Alas! Gervaise, though very much alive, soon had to yield his place to a new abbot, and go off to die where he might. We cannot approach this sordid and sinister episode without repugnance: yet we may not shirk it. For the remainder of this chapter, let us not forget that we are now looking only upon a septuagenarian broken by his infirmities, if by nought else.

Here he is at last then, arrived at that haven of silence for which he had so often told men of his craving. He who once bore so lightly—though through no desire of his—the weight of the Universal Church, now had not even the responsibility of his own house. Was he then to close the door of his cell to news from the outer world, be at peace in silence and contemplation? Such a miracle we have no right to expect, and he himself realised that he could not do it.

"I admit, Monseigneur, that I cannot remain silent . . ." So begins the first of his two celebrated letters to Bossuet against Fénelon (1697). Somewhat embarrassed by the sensation caused by this new aggression, Rancé did his best to pretend that these letters were intended for Bossuet alone. But you have only to read them to see that they were addressed to the world at large. He did not actually send them himself to the printer: but he knew perfectly well that Bossuet would not keep them under lock and key. He continues:

" The Archbishop of Cambrai's book has come into my hands ; I have been unable to understand how a man of his sort could be capable of letting himself follow after imaginings so contrary to what the Gospel teaches us. . . . One knows that you have written against this monstrous system, that is to say that you have destroyed it. . . . While I cannot think of this fine piece of work without indignation, I pray Our Lord to give him the grace to realise his aberrations."

A few days later, Bossuet having sent him the *Instruction sur les états d'oraison*, Rancé returned to the thunders of his great days:

" It is true, Monseigneur, that nothing has ever been more important for the honour of the church, the salvation of the faithful and the glory of Jesus Christ than the cause you sustain. For in truth if the chimeras of these fanatics took hold, it would be necessary to close the book of the divine scriptures . . .; it would be necessary, I say, to count for nothing the life and actions of Jesus Christ. . . . It is a consummation of impiety, hidden under extraordinary terms and affected expressions. . . . which have been invented only to impose on souls and seduce them. We shall not fail to pray God, Monseigneur. . . ."

" He put it quite clearly to M. de Meaux," writes Saint-Simon, " that if M. de Cambrai were right, it would be necessary to burn the Gospel. . . . The terrible force of this expression was so fearful that M. de Meaux thought it worthy to be shown to Mme de Maintenon, and Mme de Maintenon, whose one desire was to overwhelm the Bishop of Cambrai with all possible authorities, wished this letter to be printed. . . . One may imagine what was the triumph on the one side and the outcry on the other. M. de Cambrai

and his friends had not voices or pens enough to complain and to fall upon M. de La Trappe who, from his desert, dared to anathematise a bishop and judge—on his own authority and in the most cruel and violent manner—a question which had been referred to the Pope and was at that moment under his examination."

Well: one need not be a friend of Fénelon to feel the impropriety of these letters. After all, what *did* he take himself for?

" M. l'abbé de La Trappe," replied Bossuet, to whom no tears came amiss, " the most saintly of ascetics . . . rejects M. de Cambrai and writes terrible letters against him."

Supposing it is so: were he to roll naked among thorns four times a day, would that confer upon him the least shadow of authority over the teaching church? It may be said " that this man of God " was better qualified than any other to intervene in a dispute upon the mysteries of the interior life. But he was a simple religious, and he might at least have waited till his opinion was asked. And besides, any expert spiritual teacher would rightly deny his competence. Neither his personal experience—which we know was brief—of mystical things, nor his reading—from which were excluded the majority of modern contemplatives—had prepared him to arbitrate in this matter, and his two pronouncements show clearly that he was ignorant of the very elements of these delicate problems.

" In describing the book of the *Maximes* as ' monstrous,' " a good judge has said, " the abbot of La Trappe pretends, by tactics common among Fénelon's opponents, to confuse him with Molinos." Not quite: he was too impetuous to " pretend " anything. Between Fénelon and Molinos—

had he read either of them, by the way?—he simply saw no difference.

Anyhow, that which seemed to him so obvious was to divide the official judges of the book for two years—five for Bossuet and, to the end, five for Fénelon. In deciding finally against Fénelon, the Holy See was very careful not to make its own any of the abusive epithets so freely poured out upon him by Rancé, and at the present day the great majority of theologians agree that Bossuet is no less far from the truth than Fénelon, the one defending a false idea of hope, the other of charity.

But like some other of the abbé's unprovoked assaults, this one was not altogether fruitless and wasted, for it produced a reply.

"I take the liberty, Monsieur," writes Fénelon to Rancé in 1697, "of sending you an *Instruction pastorale* which I have made on my book. This explanation seemed to me necessary, as soon as I saw, from your letters published to the world, that a man as enlightened and experienced as you had understood me in a sense contrary to my own. I have not been in the least surprised, Monsieur, that you believed what you have been told of me, both as to the past and as to the present. I am not known to you and I have nought in me which would make it difficult to credit the evil that may be said; you have deferred to the opinions of a prelate, the power of whose mind is very great. It is true, Monsieur, that if you had done me the honour of writing to tell me what in my book had scandalised you, I should have tried either to remove the scandal or to correct myself. In case you may have this kindness after reading the accompanying *Instruction pastorale*, I shall still be quite ready, Monsieur, to profit by your

wisdom with deference. Nothing has altered in me the sentiments due to your person and to the work which God has done by your hands. Besides I am convinced that you will not be opposed to the doctrine of disinterested love, when the ambiguities with which it is darkened are removed and you have seen how great a horror I should have of diminishing the necessity of hope and the desire of our beatitude in God. On that, Monsieur, I wish only what you know better than I do St Bernard teaches with so much sublimity. To his children he has left this doctrine as his most precious heritage. If it were lost and forgotten over all the rest of the world, it is at La Trappe that we should rediscover it in the hearts of your solitaries; it is this love which gives their real value to the saintly austerities they practise. I cannot end this letter, Monsieur, without asking you the assistance of your prayers . . . I have need of them. You love the church; God is my witness that I wish to have no life save for her, and that I should have a horror of myself, if I thought I counted for anything in this occasion. I shall be all my life with sincere veneration. . . ."

Bitter pamphlets had been written against Rancé, but never one more mortifying for him than this more than pacific letter. So far we have looked at him and listened to him: looking now at Fénelon, who can fail to measure the distance between them? Or rather who can fail to see that they do not come from the same place, do not live in the same world, do not read the same Gospel? "We do not know Rancé's reply," writes the imperturbable Dubois; "we believe that he made no reply, for after all what was asked of him? Not adhesion precisely, but at least a few words of sympathy; he could not give them without setting

himself in contradiction with himself. He *must* have not replied."

I doubt if idolatry could go further. Dom Serrant is more reasonable: "Instead of protesting forcibly and vehemently, as he might have, against the accusations of which he had been the object, Fénelon, despite his dignity as archbishop, offered himself as a disciple prepared to lend a docile ear to the teachings of a simple monk; with his usual delicacy, he uttered a judicious eulogy of La Trappe which must have touched its reformer; finally he affirmed his love for the truth and for the church in an accent which had nothing of the innovator or the heresiarch. . . . The abbé de Rancé must have found himself a little embarrassed upon reading this letter." You think so? I wish I could: but I cannot. He was writing to Bossuet, soon after having received Fénelon's letter: "I urgently desire to see the condemnation of those who . . . fill [the Church] with scandals!"

*Sibi constat*: he is all of a piece. At the point we have now reached, he should no longer be able to surprise us: we should have passed beyond that. Yet this unconquerable man, with his spoilt-child ways—a doctor, I think, might toy with the word megalomania—has one last and extraordinary surprise in store for us: to wit, a countenance of humble obedience, timorousness, hesitation, weakness. Standing boldly against all powers save one, unknown to us he had been bearing a crushing yoke these twenty years —and now bore it grown heavier than before. There was one who managed him, made him say and do what he did not wish to say and do, silenced him at need. Armand Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé, Abbot of La Trappe, the indomitable scourge of Jesuits, Cistercians, Maurists, Car-

thusians, Jansenists and Fénelon, found his master—a nobody, the thrice contemptible M. Maine.

After a not at all edifying youth, this M. Maine, beginning as chief clerk with a certain M. Louis, advocate to the Grand Conseil, had undergone a conversion and had resolved to leave the world to become a Trappist—probably about 1678. "Certain infirmities (?) had not allowed him to be received into the number of the monks; then he had asked . . . to be received among the *Donnés* that is to say, those who, without taking vows, gave themselves to the house to pray and work according to their strength": a sort of family boarding-house at the gates of the abbey: neither vows nor rules. They went out when they wished. Their correspondence—an important detail this—was given to them direct. One may compare them to those children of all ages who try to march in step with a passing regiment. We are told nothing of their relations with the real monks. But as the tongue is weak, I fancy that just now and then they got from them a word or two—and in any case an avalanche of signs. Friendships grew up: parties even formed. These amphibians were among the curiosities of La Trappe. They were a feature of the countryside—which it was one of their occupations to explain to the pilgrims. One of these gives us a snapshot of M. Maine, somewhere about 1688.

"To make you a portrait of M. Maine, he is a man of forty-five, of medium build, a long face, large features, with great starting eyes and thick lips: to paint him with a single stroke, his physiognomy is like that of the abbé Menage. His coat is of coarse cloth, his cravat is of calico, a short perruque, with a big grey skull-cap covering his ears, because of the vicinity of the ponds and the humidity

of the air. His mind is of a delicacy beyond all that one can express: sound, just sense, much readiness and facility, lively and agreeable expressions of a certain turn which shows much imagination."

I do not know what idea Guitry formed of Tartufe, but I would willingly have presented him with this portrait. Ordinarily one is too apt to forget that the profound meanness of this type of man may be allied—and in Molière's time was very easily allied—with the most refined culture. We do in fact know several charming examples, particularly among women. Saint-Simon, one of his dupes, speaks of him in nearly the same terms. "He was a man who had much culture, an infinity of intelligence, gentleness, candour and the gayest and most amiable spirit." He had high spirits, impulsiveness, a rather attractive petulance—every thing to ensure that he should not be confused with the professed *dévots*. He amused our saintly abbé, reminding him, doubtless, of the sparkling conversationalists he had once known in the company of Mme de Montbazon—an innocent hyphen between the world and the desert. They must have had many such interchanges: I imagine that it was in that way that M. Maine won him in the first place. For he had promised himself to win him, watching for occasions to worm his way into the very heart of the place. At the time of his arrival, the work of secretary was entrusted to a very able monk, Dom Rigobert. "The abbé," writes Dom Gervaise, "had not then the least idea of using a layman for this work; he knew too well how contrary that would be to monastic regularity and the unfortunate consequences which would follow. It was not that the layman in question, by name Charles Maine, did not often come to offer his services and boast of his ability to write

quickly; he had come from the office of a notary in Paris . . . [but it happened that] Dom Rigobert fell ill. In this interval, a few papers of no great importance had been given to the new proselyte to transcribe . . . not to leave him entirely unoccupied. He did it well enough; the illness of the secretary, which they thought could not be of long duration, caused the abbé not to take another secretary and to use sieur Maine while awaiting Dom Rigobert's convalescence. They were mistaken, the illness lasted long and finally the holy religious died (1679). The layman during all this time had been careful to do his work well. His diligence was extreme in all that the abbé ordered him. With his clever, planning mind he found expedients for everything. To sum up all in one word, he was so well able to persuade the abbé . . . that he would render him more service than a religious, who not being able, like him, to leave the cloister, would not do all the necessary messages which he did with speed, that at last the abbé let him continue in this employment and took no other secretary."

Gervaise here steps carefully like a cat on hot bricks; as once before when he was relating the most scabrous chapter of his hero's life. This present chapter causes him no less embarrassment: how was this preposterous choice to be justified?

" They were surprised in the world and even scandalised when, in certain juridical acts, sent out in the name of the abbé, which it was necessary that the secretary should subscribe, they saw a layman assume the position of secretary. This novelty caused much talk, and Père de Sainte-Marthe, in his biting *Quatre lettres* . . . did not overlook the point. To quiet men's minds, the abbé . . . " You think he

changed his secretary? Not at all. He "had about his person a youthful religious" who looked after his room and his clothes, and who "wrote quite well. The abbé got him to do public acts of that sort. . . . Thus he was a kind of second secretary when needed":—one for official signatures and canonical camouflage, the other for intimates. Rancé would have invented casuistry, if the Jesuits had not done it first!

The reason, say the earlier biographers, was that "the abbé knew the piety and the secrecy of which he was capable." "What!" replies Gervaise: "was there not, in this large community of over a hundred men, a single religious with at least as much piety and secrecy as this layman, who was lodged outside the cloister, lived as he pleased, came in and out as he chose . . .; who went two or three times a week to visit the Marquis de Tourouvre and the other gentlemen of the neighbourhood in search of good fare; who retained in his apartment—one of the most convenient and well-arranged one might see—all the luxuries, comforts and delicacies which can serve to flatter sensuality! . . . Was secrecy safer with this layman who spoke to all sorts of people within and without, who wrote letters and received replies in total independence of everyone: was secrecy, I say, safer with this layman than with a religious of La Trappe, who speaks only to his superior and never writes to anyone? The whole thing is incomprehensible."

And indeed it would be incomprehensible even had M. Maine lived more austerely. "M. de Rancé," writes the ingenious Lenain, "considered that it was a fault opposed to simplicity in an abbot to have about him a monk to render him private services, having declared himself in all

circumstances against this abuse." For all that he had two servants—the monk we have spoken of and M. Maine. He wrote himself, in the notes where after his death men might find the outline of his own legend: "As I was informed that almost all superiors have some servants, or some monks who serve them, I have avoided both, as something unworthy of a man who professes to imitate Jesus Christ . . . unless it is through urgent necessity." Assuredly, as Père de Sainte-Marthe says, "it is to be feared that we must be accused of all that he forbids"—and, what is worse, of all that he forbids *himself*.

With such a beginning, the indispensable Maine, a marvel of intelligence, tenacity and suppleness, soon had an extraordinary ascendancy over this least docile—and apparently least feeble—of abbés. Whether in the governing of the abbey, or in relations with the outer world, or in the preparation of a manifesto, or in the meeting of some pressing difficulty, the secretary was not only his master's right hand, he was his intelligence and even his will. For more than twenty years, these two were one: so much so that when, on occasion, some sudden burst of vanity or prudence compelled the abbé to shake off this almost possession—as humiliating for him as it was calamitous—to take any steps displeasing to M. Maine, he was obliged to hide, to take advantage of the brief absences of his double, his other self.

"Above all, say nothing of it to you know who." Thus for the posthumous attacks on Jansenism that he was preparing—which assuredly the secretary would have suppressed if he could not have prevented them—Rancé confided them to Saint-Simon, making him swear secrecy, or to some Trappist who did not tremble before M. Maine.

I must seem to be turning from biographer to novelist: yet I am keeping strictly to what our documents betray of a story as true as it is improbable. As a beginning, take the correspondence of Mme de La Sablière with Rancé and Maine, recently published by the vicomte Menjot d'Elbenne, of which the authenticity seems to be beyond question.

After the death in 1687 of her director, Père Rapin—who had most to do, it would seem, with her conversion—Mme de La Sablière, who greatly admired the book *De la Sainteté et des Devoirs monastiques*, was anxious to put herself under the direction of the abbé de La Trappe. He received her coldly, "named as her confessor Père C—— and authorised her to have recourse to La Trappe only in case of absolute necessity." She obeyed humbly, being already advanced in sanctity. But the choice of this confessor was unfortunate. At one of her confessions—where yet there was no "matter for absolution"—she thought she would "die at his feet." "I have been for a long time since," she writes, "without the power to look at him. . . . If I had something serious to tell him, I do not think that I could. . . . In short it is a sentiment before which all reasoning ceases, I am beside myself whenever I approach him." This convert, anyhow, was not spoilt by her conversion. Her letters show her more exquisite than ever: this, for example, which she writes to Père Rapin, the day after the marriage of La Fare:

"I shall not attempt to dissimulate the state in which I am, to you to whom I have always said what I have in my heart. I can never be happy after the loss I have suffered of one whom I loved dearly and who loved me in a way which needs not that I make a mystery of it to a person who has a mind made like yours. . . . You see

revered Father, how I deliver myself to you. . . . You alone in the world are capable of taking things as you take them."

Rapin was worthy of this exquisite self-revelation. But how can we restrain our rage, when we realise that she wrote in this same tone to that hypocrite Maine! It is to him that she, like so many other pious women, turned—to him, omnipotent with Rancé, to obtain a cessation of the abbé's refusal to offer her that consolation and enlightenment which she failed to find in her confessor. Let us understand her aright; she did not ask to give up this glacial confessor, but simply to be allowed to write a little oftener to La Trappe and to hope that her letters should not remain unanswered. She had taken the right road. Her prayer was granted. So far, nothing to shock us. But you must think I am raving, when I tell you that nothing of the correspondence thus begun was kept from M. Maine. He and Rancé were one man, and their oneness, if it did not continue into the confessional itself, did at any rate continue to the very threshold. For after all, we priests—the Abbot of La Trappe alone excepted—make no distinction in the matter of secrecy between confession and direction. So M. Maine had under his eyes her letters to Rancé, and Rancé's letters to her. He might take copies, if he pleased, as he did of other intimate papers dictated or communicated to him by Rancé. So much the more for his archives.

For her part, Mme de La Sablière pushed so far the veneration she had vowed to them both that she found this three-cornered direction quite natural. Sometimes even, whether for fear of wearying the abbé, whether to obtain more quickly the desired replies, it was to M. Maine that

she confided her troubles. Do not be hard on her. Yesterday, after all, she was a Protestant. Some of our Catholic scruples were unknown to her. She advanced towards perfection with the generosity of a martyr and the simplicity of a child. Nothing was too costly for her in the way of expiation upon which she had entered. To show this amphibious creature—half gentleman, half sacristan—her most humiliating distresses was for her but one sacrifice the more. As to the secretary, don't let us begrudge him the little delectable profits of the nasty occupation he followed. But this high and lordly priest, M. l'abbé de la Trappe, can you conceive that he approved so unpleasant a partnership with no repugnance at all?

Once more, discreet and timid, she had need to pass through the valet to reach the master. "I suffer", she wrote to M. Maine, "every time I remind him of myself, and though you have often reassured me as to that, I still need it. . . . I think sometimes that if I had a half-hour alone with your saintly abbot, it would fix the rest of my life in peace; at other times I believe, and this is the more probable, that I should find myself so overcome in his presence that I should be unable to pronounce a word."

The greater part of the consultations—the details, as it were, with which one would have feared to weary the abbé—were communicated to M. Maine: then on his report, the abbé passed sentence. "You will settle me as to the rest of my life", she wrote him, "if you will resolve me upon them, as I beg of you. I have taken the liberty of *having you told* all that concerns me. . . ." And again: "M. M., to whom I am communicating a detail on the precaution you have ordered me to take, will tell you of it; as a result of this, I shall obey what you shall do me

the favour to order." When she becomes aware of "a very painful hardness in the breast, on the right side", she reveals this dread secret to none but her two directors: "It seems to me, Monsieur", she writes to Maine, "that all the kindnesses you have done for me merit that I should speak to you more openly than to anyone; I even look upon all that I am going to tell you as a confession which you will burn, if you please, when you have read it." Nothing, one imagines, could have cost her more than this confession. But she had forgotten, poor woman, that she was dealing with a collector of autographs, the most indiscreet of second-hand dealers. This letter has come down to us, like the others which dying she thought burnt.

"You have so convinced me", she wrote him on another day, "that my letters give you pleasure, that I believe it quite simply and give you my news on that understanding, without expecting yours." His were no more idle than hers, as devout and charming as they were urgent. For he found, the good apostle, that she did not confide in him at sufficient length. As a confessor's apprentice, it was the details, and the most intimate details, that he wished to know:

"I am very sorry, Monsieur, not to be able to do what you wish of me: it is not in the least that I am unwilling, but simply that I could not do it. *Bon Dieu!* how could I make a long narrative of my ill? I would utter as many falsehoods as words. I leave the past for what it is and when in the morning I say my *Pater* with a little faith, I have my daily bread: the morrow is not for me. I see clearly that nothing would seem more foolish than this note, if it were found: I should not like it, but it will not be, and I count it burnt as soon as read."

For once, I pardon M. Maine his treachery. One is not

sorry to see him thus—all excited at first, his appetite roused, then looking foolish as the lark flies away. As you may well imagine, these letters, amiable as they were, were not what his appetite really craved. To see her would be better still: but she escaped once more:

"It is not because of any inconvenience to myself, Monsieur, that I have resolved never again to see anyone at all, it is because I have thought I ought to offer this sacrifice. I am not insensible either to friendship or to good conversation, and that is why I must renounce it. . . . So, Monsieur, permit me to refuse the honour you wish to pay me. . . ."

Others, still greater ladies, must have shown themselves more welcoming—within bounds, of course, yet enough to tickle his vanity and serve his obscure designs. I admit that the marvellous letters I have just been running through are the only ones which allow us actually to catch these Siamese twins of spiritual direction red-handed, in all the detail of their performance. But why should they have reserved to Mme de La Sablière the monopoly of their joint lights. If all Rancé's women penitents did not correspond direct with M. Maine—and several did—we may be certain that few of their secrets remained hidden from him. He read everything that came in to La Trappe, everything that went out. In case of a crisis, when he had reason to fear that some message was escaping him, he was the man, as we know, to bully the terrified bearer on the very doorstep and snatch his letter-bag from him.

After all this, there is no great need to follow in other fields their strict daily collaboration. Spiritual direction was not, after all, what occupied them most. But we have found the formula of this abbatial firm—Rancé and Maine

were but one man: and the one who had the greater authority was not necessarily the one who bore the crosier. Further, the growing infirmities and the exhaustion of the one who bore the title prevented him from carrying out all the duties of his office—and we know how he understood his duties! The other, therefore, did them for him: so that La Trappe found itself under the government of one abbot in two persons—the second of the two being by no means the less despotic.

According to Dom Gervaise, M. Maine "pushed his vengeance against the religious who did not bend blindly beneath his authority to the point of causing some to perish in the prisons of La Trappe." He is dramatising, perhaps: but he is not inventing. If the secretary had put in prison only two or three monks and only for eight or ten days, the irregularity would be very great. Besides the scandal was public. Rancé was not unaware of it. But to deny existing facts—or rather not to see them or to forget them when seen—came easy to him. To one of his friends, who warned him of these disturbing rumours, the abbé replied calmly: "It is not true that [M. Maine] meddles in anything at all." Had he been told that M. Maine exercised a right of inspection on the spiritual correspondence of La Trappe, he would still have replied: "It is not true."

Obviously one single day did not turn this wheedling creature into a despot. He did not cast aside his crutches till he was sure he could take any liberties he chose, first with the abbot, then with the monks. Even the monks he did not treat all alike: he managed, flattered, held in his hand perhaps those who, having no part in the government of the abbey, could offer no obstacle—to wit the prodigal sons, worldlings or dragoons converted late.

These, without doubt, were the most picturesque section of La Trappe, but they were not the structure proper. We have said that La Trappe owed its prodigious and lasting success, to its reformer of course, but also to the religious already formed who came to it from all the Orders—Franciscans, Celestines, Carmelites, Maurists, Premonstratensians. Now these religious, Gervaise continues, "M. Maine did not love, and he did not love them because, as they held all the offices of the monastery, their posts, which gave them power to speak, to go and come about the house, to enter everywhere, furnished them at the same time opportunities to scrutinise more closely the conduct of this ambitious man who wished to dominate La Trappe and enjoy the great reputation this saintly house held in the world, without taking part in the austerities practised there; which sometimes drew upon him rather strong remonstrances from his superiors. He did not love them, because they often represented to the saintly abbé that this man was destroying the house by his indiscretions, by his endless tittle-tattle, by his unceasing correspondence . . . by the imperious airs he assumed towards everyone . . . and by an infinity of other bad qualities."

What exactly did he want? What was his secret? We do not even know if he had one. The craving for intrigue *as* intrigue, the ambition to dominate would in the last resort explain his conduct. And of course there was—as Gervaise insinuates—the natural temptation to exploit for his own advantage the prestige of the abbot and the sanctity of the monks. A *cicerone* incrusted in the place, a gleam of the mystic splendour radiating from La Trappe illumined him too. To the common run of pilgrims he showed

himself, tossed a few condescending words, and passed on; with the more important, he spread himself lavishly, thus gradually making for himself resplendent friendships. The friends of his double were his friends. See him as the courtyard receives the King of England, or the duchesse de Guise, or M. Arnauld.

"The credit this man had acquired with the outside world prevented any open opposition to his wishes. Since the abbé was forced to borrow his hand to reply even to letters on matters of conscience, the secretary had become the depositary of all the secrets of an infinity of people who held distinguished rank in the different estates of the realm. . . . From confidence they had passed to a sort of respect. . . . Everyone had insensibly grown used to coming to revere him almost as much as the abbot. Many persons of quality actually paid court to him to secure the friendship of his master and prompt replies." Besides—he had not taken a vow of poverty! Small presents were a reasonable encouragement to his zeal and a reasonable reward for his good offices. He had a right to a commission on the prayers he was charged to request from the abbot. He it was, by the way, who pocketed the royalties on the abbot's books. Hence his haste to bear off to the printer the so-called confidential papers we know of. One thing more: he was bound closely to the Jansenists and he may have been at La Trappe as their secret agent, charged to watch Rancé and manage him, keep him in good dispositions towards the party and at need moderate the violent reactions they had some grounds for fearing from him. Obviously this is only a guess: yet as such not to be dismissed off-hand: it would shed light on more than one mystery.

However that may be, the successor chosen by Rancé

on his own retirement, Dom Zozime—a holy monk, but timid and colourless—had to bend in his turn before M. Maine. "He found himself always and everywhere confronted by the secretary; who, since the former abbot had lost the power of acting, of writing and even of signing his name, had made himself so necessary and had so abused the authority which the holy man had let him assume during his long illness, that one might say of him that he was more master in the house than the superiors themselves. Keys, papers, letters come by post, even money—all were at his disposal. When he wished a thing, it had to be done. . . . Dom Zozime always found this man in his road, upsetting all his plans. . . . He could not so much as receive a novice to profession or send him away if Maine did not see fit; he went off to paint pictures to the sick man as he pleased, and that holy man . . . gave orders in accordance with the report of his secretary, who would then come to signify them to the abbot. The new abbot was not so stupid as not to be aware of the source from which these hindrances came, but the mere name of the former abbot was for him the same as a command."

Dom Gervaise, who replaced Zozime (who died in 1696), showed himself less feeble. Later he paid dearly for his independence. It is surprising that M. Maine did not oppose his veto to a choice which could scarcely fail to displease him. But Rancé had perhaps not yet arrived at the point of total abdication. For one of the last times in his life, he spoke as master. Gervaise was one of his favourites. He had given him his own name—Dom Armand-François Gervaise. "He was the son of a Paris doctor, and after having studied successfully with the Jesuits (whose friend he was to remain) he had entered

the Discalced Carmelites. . . . As he had learning and skill in words, his superiors had employed him successively in teaching and preaching, and he had acquired a certain renown [notably in the diocese of Meaux: Bossuet thought highly of him]. He had a brother treasurer of Saint-Martin of Tours, a very holy priest, who later devoted himself to the missions, was consecrated Bishop of Horren *in partibus* and died in Africa, murdered by the Arabs. Père Aubereau, of Sainte-Geneviève, was his uncle. The austerities of Carmel did not seem to him severe enough and he had for some time begged the favour of admission to La Trappe; but the abbé de Rancé refused to receive him because of the services he was capable of rendering in the world; nevertheless after fourteen years of urging, he had yielded. . . . As he had always lived as a good religious and in a manner which gave grounds for hoping much from his virtue, Dom Zozime"—that is Rancé!—"had appointed him prior . . . and he had acquitted himself of this charge with a zeal and success which caused him to be judged worthy of a higher." So speaks Dubois, cowardly and facing both ways. He knew that Gervaise had been unworthily calumniated and he set himself—easy enough to guess why—to praise him as faintly as possible. It was not without reason that I spoke above of his connections: this man, the brother of a martyr, a monk who had begged for fourteen years to be allowed to leave an austere observance for one harsher still and who, as a Trappist, had received from his two abbots and his brethren the highest marks of confidence—this monk, according to M. Maine, is all that is vile. There are matters in which, material proofs being lacking, the historian must rely on his own instinct, like Alexander refusing to believe that his physician was

plotting to poison him and drinking off at one gulp the suspected cup. I have taken my place and lifted the cup. For me Dom Gervaise is an honest man: probably much more than that, but at least that.

From the moment of his election, Gervaise found himself "in the same troubles as Zozime"—or rather in worse. "He saw the secretary possessing the former abbot so closely that it was not possible to find an instant to speak to him in private. At whatever hour of the day he came to his room, he found this man, and while he was kneeling with uncovered head beside his one time Father, discussing with him the affairs of the house, the layman was sitting in an arm-chair with his hat on, often giving his decisions before the old man had replied.

"It was upon one of these occasions that the new abbot, unable longer to suffer such insolence, said to him: 'Monsieur, it is not you that I come to consult . . . and you would please me by minding your own business.' Offended by this, Maine left the room brusquely, mumbling words that no one caught. The new abbot profited by this circumstance to represent to his Father that he could not govern his community with the success he expected if he had not the honour to converse with him privately; that having to speak to him of the most secret dispositions of his brethren . . . it was not fitting that a layman, who could go off whenever he pleased [should be put in possession of all these things]. The old abbot was convinced and from that day he ordered his secretary to leave his room whenever the abbot entered it. This order plunged him in despair. From that moment he plotted the destruction of the new abbot."

This is the account Gervaise gives: once more, perhaps,

more or less dramatising but only in detail, not, I fancy, in the general statement. The most exacting internal criticism would accept, in its totality and apart from a few circumstances, the account—coherent, more than probable, and thoroughly moderate—he has left us of his long trial. Besides, all the checks by which we can test his story from many authentic documents (including the statements of his enemy, Saint-Simon) justify him. According to Gervaise, Bossuet who, I repeat, wished him well, tried to intervene, but without success. "This worthy prelate was too clear-sighted not to recognise the irregularity of such conduct; he spoke strongly to the former abbot and advised him to get rid of a man who assumed so much authority in the house, but he could gain nothing. 'For more than twenty years,' said the old abbot, 'I have been accustomed to his ways; he is expeditious; in the state I am in, I must have a man of this character. Before I should get used to another's way of action, what remains of my life would have slipped by. We shall try to prevent him abusing the authority he has acquired.' The bishop could not but testify to the new abbot that his situation was very difficult, and that he would have many contradictions to bear."

Rightly or wrongly—and we must allow for his *arrière-pensée*, the desire to find some excuse for Rancé's weakness—Dom Serrant would have us believe that the youthful abbot, energetic and very active, made too much haste to govern in his own way the house of which he was sole chief. It is possible—yet the monks of La Trappe did not think so and his long-suffering, or rather his timidity, in this matter of the secretary do not suggest a very unmanageable abbot! For after all he had but to say the word

to have Maine shown the door. Further Dom Serrant himself is constrained to admit that Gervaise "had the especial misfortune to displease those who would have liked to see him completely efface himself behind the former abbot and whose authority within the house and spirit of independence he set out to diminish. M. Maine, the duc de Saint-Simon and the abbess of the Clairets were the three chiefs of the party who brought about his ruin."

To these two laymen must be added the comte du Charmel, not less active and influential. These three gentlemen and the one lady set themselves up as a sort of regency council. The convent of the Clairets, which was under the spiritual jurisdiction of La Trappe, had at that time for abbess an ambitious schemer, one Mme de Valençay. She and M. Maine were as thick as thieves and there was no indignity she did not make Gervaise suffer.

Their first plan of campaign was admirably simple and treacherous: it was to rouse opinion against Gervaise by repeating everywhere that the new abbot, not content with treating Rancé with contempt, roughness even, was determined to leave nothing remaining of the work of sanctity which he had so laboriously and successfully brought into being. Thus among a thousand other vehement protestations against so horrible a scandal, we learn that the abbess, duly catechised by Maine "set complaints pouring forth in all directions; that she had borne them even to the throne of His Majesty," drawing Louis XIV's attention particularly to "the ill treatment Gervaise was inflicting upon his Father and benefactor." Extravagant as it all seems to us, this slander was taken seriously. We have the actual reply, stern and threatening, sent by Père

de La Chaise, not to the abbess but to Dom Gervaise: if he continues in the evil way upon which he has entered, La Trappe will lose all the esteem Rancé had gained for it in the eyes of the King. There was no need to say what that would mean.

"It was not very difficult for the new abbot," continues Gervaise, "to recognise in all this the malignity of the lay secretary, who, in agreement with the abbess of the Clairets, covered their own personal grudge with the great name of the abbot. . . . It was his usual language, and the mask he used to impose it upon the public. To touch him was, according to him, to touch the former abbot; to bring him back within the bounds of his employment . . . was to persecute that holy man. Thus all Gervaise did was to take the letter of Père de la Chaise to his beloved Father and demand justice. 'I shall do you justice,' the saintly man said at once, in the utmost astonishment at reading this letter; 'I wish to reply myself upon all that concerns me.' In fact he wrote so strongly to Père de la Chaise, bore witness so warmly to the satisfaction he had in his successor (going so far as to say that if it all had to be done over again he would never choose any other) that the Reverend Father, being himself convinced, convinced the King likewise."

Thereupon there came a further letter from the king's confessor to Gervaise, this time all honey: "The King has had great joy to learn of your good understanding with your predecessor. . . . As to Mme des Clairets . . . His Majesty does not think it necessary to enter into the complaints of this abbess." It is a pleasing formula, based on a euphemism. Kings ask pardon of none but God. La Chaise could not write in plain language: "The King,

having been so incautious as to be taken in by the complaints of this lying woman, is charmed to come out again."

M. Maine had not yet been caught absolutely in the act, and as none is so blind as he that will not see, Rancé could still try to persuade himself that this master-rogue had had no part in the plot. But " they were not long without proofs of his determined malice. These proofs are still kept and they will show to all time the abominable plot he had prepared to overthrow this abbot. Two replies made to the secretary by Mme de Harlay, a religious of the Visitation, chanced to fall into the hands of the new abbot. The precautions that had been taken to prevent him seeing them . . . caused him to suspect that there was some mystery. He opened them "—it is a good sign that he feels the need of excusing himself—" and found that that worthy nun said ' that he [Maine] had caused her profound affliction in informing her of the cruel persecution put by the new abbot upon his Father; that, from that moment, she had been able to take no rest, and that he must not fail to let her know as soon as possible what means could be taken to deliver that holy man from such a tyranny, which cried for vengeance to heaven and earth.' "

" This lady—a Harlay—was powerful and of much influence because of her family: her veneration for the old abbot was measureless: she had been many years under his direction; Maine was the intermediary and wrote the letters; thus he himself had become the depository of the secrets of her conscience; one may judge from that what damage she was in a state to do the so-called persecutor. Upon the instant, Gervaise bore these letters to the saintly abbot: ' So, Father, will you be convinced now? ' The good man could scarcely believe his eyes. He read and

re-read the letters, but found no possible excuse for the slanderer. He sent for him, uttered terrible reproaches: the other gave but lame excuses: 'How could I have written such things? She has misunderstood my letters.'

"The new abbot waited some days to see if his old superior would not at last make up his mind to dismiss from his house so dangerous a man. But seeing that nothing shook him, he took counsel with certain prudent men, and their opinion was that he must himself dismiss him, since the old abbot seemingly had not the strength. So he sent his prior to inform the secretary from him that he must depart":—was Gervaise himself in terror of Maine? It is not at all unlikely. "This blow, which he was not expecting, stunned him. . . . He betook himself to the saintly man, threw himself at his feet, asked pardon, shed a few tears, moved his pity. A few minutes later, the old abbot sent to ask his successor to come and see him. He admitted that he had every imaginable cause of complaint in the conduct of his secretary, but such a thing would not happen again: he had promised to repair his fault and the abbot asked pardon for him. 'Consider,' he added, 'that in the condition in which I am, I cannot do without him. I have now only a few moments to live, after my death you will get rid of him.' The new abbot could not hold out against so touching a prayer: 'You are the master, Reverend Father, you shall dispose of him as you please, but you are going to leave a viper in my bosom.'"

At this scene, the abbé Dubois's bowels were stirred within him. "The abbé de Rancé," he cried, "felt softened at the sight of this old man who had left all to dwell near him"—and gained all by doing so—"who, at this hour of his life, returning to the world, would find neither

relations nor friends, nor even a cottage hearth to sit by."

Come now, my dear abbé Dubois. You know as well as I do that the abbess of the Clairets had offered him lodgment. Leave those humbugs at La Trappe, she had written, and come and settle here.

"Then," continues Dubois, "the voice of his conscience being joined to that of his heart, he thought himself obliged to demand pardon for him." Come, again! Leave the sacred word "conscience" for other occasions. Rancé's bounden duty is here as clear as daylight. Whatever services his *valet de chambre* rendered him, whatever reasons he had for loving or fearing him, he had before God no right to clutch to himself this person whose everlasting intrigues kept up a host of disorders within and without the abbey and who prevented the sole legitimate abbot from governing his house. Surely two abbots were enough —for Rancé still governed as well as Gervaise: three were extreme! Let them give him an adequate pension and then be done with him. Excuse Rancé as best you can for his sinful weakness: but for God's sake do not canonise him for it.

— "Viper" was exactly the right word. The persecution continued, of course, and grew worse. Maine, "irritated at the abbé's having wished to expel him . . . did not cease to raise new vexations against him"—some of these were absolutely maddening, but they are too long to set down here. "Many anonymous letters, full of insults and imaginary charges, came to him through the post; whatever care the secretary had taken to disguise his style and his writing, yet both were recognisable." Insults—the same as before, though soon they were to find some of a

more diabolic sort—and threats: they were going to complain to the King, already aroused against Gervaise and prepared to put an end to La Trappe. To break Gervaise, they would make use of "all the powers."

"The abbot had no doubt that it was in these terms that the secretary, on the one hand, and the abbess of Les Clairets on the other"—and Saint-Simon, and du Charmel—"spoke of him to their friends in the letters they sent in all directions, and blackened him in the eyes of the world by every sort of slander. . . . Enclosed in his cloister, occupied day and night with his community, he could not ward off these blows."

To complete his troubles, his neighbour, the Bishop of Séez, died in his arms. The Bishop had loved him greatly and, deeply grieved by the scandalous imbroglio of La Trappe, was actively at work trying to put an end to it. From now on he stood alone, for though the great majority of his monks were with him, what could they do? Gervaise resolved to give up the struggle and to give back his abbey into the hands of the King. Informed of this resolution, Rancé "said all he could to turn him from it," begging him to "postpone action for at least a fortnight . . . before taking the final steps." Gervaise "then made all necessary reflexions on what his predecessor had said to him; but he found nothing therein which could make him alter his decision, because he had not told him the principal (the only) reason which compelled him to retire, which was that he would never have any peace while his secretary remained at La Trappe."

Whereupon I remark once more that—whether from delicacy or timorousness—Gervaise was certainly not the thunderbolt they would have us believe. And I remark

also that the rages of that dying lion, the old abbot, must obviously still have been formidable. He sheathed his claws only under the glance—or the rod—of his tamer.

Neither Bossuet, nor Gervaise, nor, need we say, the aspen-like Lenain dared to hold up his duty in plain language before him. The fortnight over, Gervaise informed him that he remained fixed in his intention. His letter, with his resignation, was therefore " put in the post and addressed to the Archbishop of Paris [Noailles] for presentation to the king. The secretary, who had his spies, had no sooner learnt this, than he had the audacity to take the letter from the post, upon the pretence that something had been forgotten; he added a second envelope addressed to the comte du Charmel, his confidant in Paris (less involved in affairs, less of a busy-body, and I fancy of more influence at court than Saint-Simon). . . . He instructed him in all he must say to that prelate and how he must act to ensure his accepting the resignation. The strongest of his reasons was that the Father Abbot [Gervaise] was an anti-Jansenist and would never suffer one of that party at La Trappe. It is well known how great was the zeal of the Lord Archbishop for that party."

But things did not go as speedily as our two comrades had promised themselves. " The King, who was not nearly as incensed against the abbot of La Trappe as his enemies spread abroad, and as the abbot himself upon this general rumour had believed, received the package and put it into his pocket, for he was going to mass. . . . That evening, having read the letter, he said to Père de La Chaise: ' No, no. He must not resign; I know that he is doing very well. . . .' "

We were not there: nor was Gervaise. But this episode,

slight as it is, accords well with what followed. We must do the confessor this justice: they were not going to trip up his conscience twice. In spite of all the hostile reports with which he was to be wearied, he retained his esteem for Gervaise to the end and was not slow in telling him so.

"This reply of the King was calculated to render the new abbot's enemies desperate, and it was from this moment that they put into operation the most degraded means—rightly to be called diabolic—to ruin him and constrain the king, almost in his own despite", to accept the resignation.

He was a monk and a priest: to ruin him, therefore, was child's play. The routine in such cases is well-established. Yet M. Maine is not the man to rest content with the traditional calumny—calumny, so to speak, according to the rubrics. Since his object was to blacken, there was nothing he would stop at. The details we find in Saint-Simon. This chapter of the *Mémoires* is only too well known, and it will be understood that I give here as brief a summary as possible. It relates that Gervaise incurred the punishment of those "professing themselves to be wise", spoken of in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. Caught in the act, we are told, they were dragged, half dead with shame—he and his partner in sin—before the feet of Rancé who "thought only of consoling him with infinite charity." It was because of *this* that the unworthy abbot offered his resignation to the king.

You see how simple it is. Sainte-Beuve, usually more clear-sighted, is taken in by this obscene gossip, and after him, quite recently, M. Herriot—in a very moving chapter of his *Forêt Normande*, a chapter more edifying, I fear,

than the whole of the present book. In neither of them is it given—as they admit—as the result of a real enquiry. They simply take Saint-Simon's word for it. "To contest the facts", writes M. Herriot, "it would be necessary to accuse Saint-Simon, who claims to have known them personally, of lying." But Saint-Simon nowhere claims to have seen things so close at hand. When he testifies as an eye-witness, we accept his testimony without hesitation; but when he is a mere echo of other people's affirmations, his word has no more and no less weight than the affirmations he echoes. Saint-Simon was not a liar: but he may well have been a dupe, the blindly credulous victim of a master liar, all the more easily credulous because of his own intense hatred of the accused. Had Gervaise committed no other crime than the crime of succeeding Rancé and doing it well, it would have been enough to ensure Saint-Simon's dislike. He passionately venerated the old abbot. Beginning with that and lying tirelessly, M. Maine whipped him to rage by showing him a picture of Rancé suffering martyrdom at the hands of Gervaise. Hence the furious campaign he waged at Versailles. He was the Léon Daudet of his time. His rage unleashed, what else was he likely to do but accept joyfully and without investigation the new calumny forged by the secretary? Drunkard, thief, poisoner—for Saint-Simon Gervaise was capable of anything.

Thus against Gervaise we have here only the word of his mortal enemy, whose good faith is more than suspect, handed on to us by an enraged partisan. Nor am I the first to brush aside this fable. If any one man was incapable of ignorance of the inner history of the abbey—and still more of such sensational scenes—that man was surely

the prior who was in charge at the time: and he was so convinced of Gervaise's innocence that he abandoned La Trappe to follow him in his exile. For the sub-prior, the very scrupulous Dom Lenain, Gervaise is "the worthy successor" of Rancé. Le Moreri considers that the justification of himself offered by Gervaise in his *Jugement critique* proves his case "to demonstration" on every point. For Dubois, the private life of Gervaise is "beyond attack." Likewise Dom Serrant: "The accusations brought by Saint-Simon", he says, "seem to us inspired principally by passion and ill-founded." So again, M. de Boislisle: "Unpleasant details . . . of which many are disputable and even impossible of acceptance."

All this is true equally of a new calumny, not less odious, launched by Maine after the first had been going for a long time, and developed with delight by Saint-Simon. Chateaubriand does it full justice in two words. I shall waste no time discussing it.

To resume the thread of the story: while the slander was making its way in the city and at the Court, "defamatory pamphlets" continued to rain upon La Trappe. "The abbot contented himself with taking them to his former superior. . . . Then the holy man saw clearly that the time was not suitable for a resignation", and he wrote to the Archbishop of Paris to prevent its acceptance. His letter is perfect: he had at first agreed to the resignation, "hoping that God would be glorified by this example of virtue" and that, at the same time, "the storm which had arisen against" Gervaise would be calmed. But he sees "quite a contrary effect", and he is "informed that the malignity of man abuses so Christian an action." How? Obviously by attributing this quite spontaneous resignation

to the cause to which Saint-Simon attributes it. "I know this", he continues, "from the great number of pamphlets and letters full of falsehoods and calumnies which have come into my hands." Seeing, then, "that in the present situation, men, still heated by the rumours which have gone before, would make an ill use" of what should have calmed them, it has "come strongly into his mind . . . that it would be a great good if one could stop the effect of this resignation", remembering that the king has not yet accepted it.

In truth, it seems to me very probable that the initiative in this step came from Gervaise himself: he may have profited by an absence of Maine to dictate the letter to Rancé. But if he had just been caught red-handed in the crime with which he was charged, would he have had the impudence to act so, or Rancé the criminal weakness to consent? Faced with this and unable to find any more serious charges against Gervaise, Serrant and Dubois accuse him of too much love of power: having sent in his resignation, he now wants Rancé to help him withdraw it. But surely with the abominable calumny now circulating the situation was entirely changed. Before he had been accused only of a few minor abuses of authority, now he was accused of a crime—and such a crime! If his resignation were accepted, it would be taken, inevitably, as a punishment following upon a confession. Later, as Rancé's letter says, they might see: but Gervaise must remain Abbot of La Trappe for so long as his honour—and the honour of the abbey—might be compromised by his resigning.

Here again the old abbot was faced with a plain and pressing duty. Responsible for his share, his real share, in the iniquity that was being perpetrated, he owed Gervaise

some enormous act of reparation, either to dismiss the slanderer—though we know he could never bring himself to that—or to give the lie publicly to the slander by begging the king not to accept the resignation of the slandered monk. If he needed to be shown this duty, so much the worse for him: but at any rate he did it—and the act was not without merit, considering his fear of Maine. That sense of a plain duty was obviously his reason for doing it, and not, as Saint-Simon claims, his thirst for suffering. "He rejoiced too much in this new trial", writes the mystic duke, "and his one fear was to be liberated from this furnace. He excused therefore all that he could not deny, he swallowed in deep draughts the bitterness of this chalice."

That was one of Maine's most dazzling inspirations. If you asked how came it that the vehement abbot let himself thus be tormented by his successor and looked calmly upon the imminent ruin of his work—"Ah!" he replied: "How little you know the saints. Ours would be too deeply grieved if you rid him of his torturer." By comparison with Maine, Molière's Tartufe was no more than a tyro.

However, Rancé's tardy move—not perhaps very vigorously followed up—did not succeed. The resignation was accepted. The king was sick of the whole business, and no wonder. After all, he said to his confessor, "I do no wrong to the abbot of La Trappe [Gervaise] if I grant him what he asks, and at the same time I satisfy several people who are begging me to accept his resignation." As a summing-up of the situation it does not amount to much. But it is clear that the king was not proud of the decision he had just given. He almost excuses himself to Père de la Chaise. But Heaven keep me from meddling

with the consciences of kings: the consciences of abbots are tangled enough. But I have some rights over the confessor who—be it whispered—interests me much more than Louis XIV. Louis soon lost his uncertain bearings in this jungle. It was not that he lacked good-will, which he had in over-abundance. But the more he applied himself to the affairs of the Church, the less he understood them. La Chaise, on the other hand, beginning by letting the conspirators take him by surprise, was not long in unmasking their plot. He knew of old all that was to be known of ecclesiastical vipers. He had passed "from white to black", according to Saint-Simon, who harassed him endlessly and served him up piping hot all the scandals of La Trappe, not forgetting a modest reminder of the Epistle to the Romans. What could a hot-head like Saint-Simon do with the loyal, clear-sighted Jesuit whom even the pious airs and graces of Mme de Maintenon left mistrustful and hostile?

After the king's decision, which obviously had not satisfied him, La Chaise summoned the vanquished Gervaise to Fontainebleau, welcomed him, conversed with him, as priest to priest, with the most cordial confidence. The damage was done; there was nothing for him now but to resign himself without murmuring, awaiting the justice of God and of history. Neither God nor history is ever in a hurry, but sooner or later they act. Finally, a few days later, La Chaise wrote this letter, which I challenge critics—those, that is, who can read—not to find decisive:

"Monsieur. I have received the procuration and the resignation you have left me. Both are in the correct form. You could not better punish those who have willed to treat you so than by despising them. I again repeat what

I have already told you, that the King has been very much edified by the facility with which you have abandoned the title of abbot to withdraw into solitude. He has you in especial esteem and consideration. He has again ordered me today to recommend him to your prayers. That must suffice you. Be then at peace on that side, and be certain that the malignity of those who have employed every means to ruin you will recoil upon them rather than upon you. Do not forget in your Holy Sacrifices him who is perfectly. . . . Paris, this 28 December 1698."

A few days later (1st January 1699) the king, passing over the candidate proposed by Rancé, gave the abbacy to Gervaise's nominee, Dom Jacques de la Cour. So now there were four abbots in one abbey—the present abbot, the two ex-abbots, and M. Maine. Gervaise was quickly made to realise that three were enough. He departed, therefore, followed by a few monks who could not make up their minds to abandon him. He sought refuge at the abbey of Sept-Fonts, the second Trappe of that day, no less admirable than the first but ruled by an abbot who preferred a quiet life. The subsequent career of Gervaise does not concern us. A very good man, an excellent monk, he had not that nameless quality which makes saints: for which Rancé's biographers reproach him! Uprooted and I fear embittered he went from one solitude to another, always scrupulously faithful to the rule of La Trappe. For relaxation and to help him to forget, he took to writing, which after all is no crime: Lives of St Cyprian, St Irenaeus, St Paulinus, St Epiphanius, the abbé Suger, Père Gourdain. They are not by any means small books. I have not read them all. The reference-books say that they show more warmth, imagination and

fluency than critical quality. The warmth I can guarantee without seeing them. His sympathy was for preference with victims of calumny and beaten men: as in his Lives of Rufinus, Abélard and Héloise, the abbé Joachim. Between whiles he published his *Jugement critique* on Rancé's first two biographers, Maupeou and Marsollier, both of them documented by M. Maine. "It is necessary to read this book", says Chaudon's *Dictionnaire*, "if one wishes rightly to know the reformer of La Trappe, somewhat flattered by his historians." The reader knows how well we have followed this advice: but what seems to me truly noble is that in the very book in which he tells the story of his disgrace, he does everything possible and impossible to prevent any of the shame of this disgrace from bespattering Rancé. He rests faithful to him—fanatically faithful—to the end. Not content with defending him against Dom Thuillier, the historian of the Mabillon-Rancé controversy —he takes up at his own risk the battles of his chief against the Common Observance of Cîteaux.

Published in 1746, the first volume—the only one which was able to appear—of his *Histoire générale de la réforme de l'Ordre de Cîteaux*, is a pamphlet, but very ably done and so violent that it brought him to end his days in prison, twice martyr for his "*saint abbé*." He died in 1751, aged ninety-one.

I hope the drama we have just been relating will not cause anyone to accuse us of forgetting our hero. He, after all, has scarcely been off the stage for a moment: willy-nilly he keeps the principal rôle: dumb more often than not, passive and vacillating, but all the more interesting for us as he grows more inert. That inertia remains unfathomable, a ceaseless temptation to our curiosity, alto-

gether defeating us. Yet different as he seems from the energetic and turbulent Rancé under whose tread our other chapters have shaken, yet in truth he remains the same. Nothing counts for him save the passion of the moment—yesterday the extermination of whoever thought differently from himself—today the need of keeping his M. Maine. Let them leave him his secretary and he asks no more. And there is still, though differently manifested, the same congenital unconsciousness, the same miraculous inability—I do not say to reform himself, for in that he would be only a man like other men—but to know himself, to analyse himself and at need to judge himself in the wrong.

Gervaise does not agree with us on this. "From that sad moment", he writes, "the saintly man had no happy days. He faded visibly: he did but languish: a sad and sombre melancholy insensibly crept upon him and at last a few months later brought him to the tomb." I should like to believe that any moral uneasiness was the root cause of his languishing: I find it hard. In any case we know little of this lingering death-agony. The malignity of his adversaries and the solicitude of his friends are at issue over these last years as over the first. Perhaps ever so little touched with romance, the account of his death is very fine: it does not fall below those famous *Relations* in which Rancé has described the last moments of so many of his Trappists and which remain his finest work. I must quote one surprising detail which the author of the account—the bishop of Séez—certainly would not have invented.

"Just about half an hour after midnight, he fell into so great a weakness in the hands of his monks that they thought him dead; he was revived. . . . He was offered a crucifix; after having kissed the image of Our Saviour,

he kissed a skull which was at the foot of the cross. He noticed that after him a monk kissed the image of Christ without kissing the skull. Then the Father said to him with warmth: 'Why will you not also kiss the skull? Kiss, kiss without repugnance the image of death of which you must not fear the reality.'"

Is it not truly admirable? A few minutes before facing his judge, he finds the strength to do some judging on his own account, to think of the duties of others, to call to order an unhappy poor wretch who in the distress of the moment has neglected an insignificant rite. We cannot be sure that Rancé in dying still possesses himself whole and entire, but at any rate the reflexes of command and censure survive triumphant to the very end.

Then they prepared the ashes and the straw: and he lay down upon them: a moving piece of ritual rendered familiar to us by the *Relations* and which would altogether overwhelm us if we could see Dom Gervaise by the bedside, near the dying man. M. Maine was there, I fancy.

"So died Armand-Jean le Bouthillier de Rancé, former abbot of La Trappe, the twenty-seventh of the month of October 1700, at half past one in the afternoon, aged seventy-five years almost completed, thirty-seven years and four months after his entry upon the hard way of expiation. He ended with his century, which is so rich in celebrities of every sort, among whom he has a place apart, and in his *genre*, a rank all his own; *extinctus est una cum saeculo cujus pars fuerat longe spectatissima.*" Thus speaks the abbé Dubois. In the face of death, history holds her peace: that moment belongs to the panegyrists.

It was likewise the end of Maine, under whose yoke the timid Jacques de la Cour had had to bend. At last "he fell

into the ditch which he had dug for others, and despite all the credit of a lord at Court "—Saint-Simon of course—" by which he was supported and by which he claimed to rule in La Trappe, the cries of the monks of this holy place reached to the throne of the King."—Père de la Chaise lived still—" His Majesty's orders followed quickly. A *lettre de cachet* expelled him from La Trappe, with a prohibition against ever again setting foot there, approaching within thirty leagues, or even writing a letter to it. He went to end his days elsewhere; nothing more was heard of this man, one of the most intriguing, ambitious, vindictive and dangerous men ever seen."

## Chapter X

## DEATHLESS LA TRAPPE

The true biographer has not two weights or two measures. For him as for the confessor, the doctor, the judge—I do not say the jury—and the photographer all men are equal. Whence it follows that the closer our application to the humble and cheerless task assigned to us in the division of the work, the more we are condemned to the commonplaces and hard outlines of prose. Poetry we must leave to historians proper, a more august race whose servants we are and who have no interest save in heroes. Of the men-just-as-they-are that we pass on to them, they let the vast majority fall into the discard: and even of those highly privileged ones that they retain, they keep only the greatness as it were, and let the *man* go. It has been regretted a shade naïvely, that Bossuet wrote no life of Rancé. Had he done it, how rarely beautiful it would have been, how faithful if not to Rancé the man, at any rate to Rancé the historical character. "God", he would have said lyrically, "has revealed to us that He alone makes conquerors and that He alone makes them serve His purposes. Who but He has made a Cyrus? Who could have formed an Alexander, but that same God, Who from afar off and in vivid figures showed their invincible ardour to His prophet Daniel. Behold this conqueror: how swiftly he comes from the west and he touches not the ground. . . . Already the king of Persia is in his hands: 'at sight of him he was

enraged against him, and struck him, and when he had cast him down he stamped upon him and none could deliver him out of his hand.' To hear but these words of Daniel, whom would you think to see under this figure, Alexander or the Reformer of La Trappe"—not only the greater Rancé, but even, looking at things as history *must* look at them, the true Rancé, the only Rancé, as shown forth for all time by his immortal work. Sainte-Beuve is right: "Rancé has a peak by which he surpasses all his adversaries." He conceived, dared, created La Trappe.

"In the matter of monastic institutions", wrote Dom Innocent Le Masson ironically, "it is not enough to fire a sort of rocket into the air by extraordinary and sensational observances, to be seen by all, to make a fine blaze, to be admired and suddenly to go out, leaving behind it only a piece of wood to fall to the ground." He was a bad prophet, too worldly wise. To this day, after so great a space of time, the Cistercian menology thus commemorates the glorious day on which this rocket was fired never to be extinguished:

"14 July. The year of Our Lord 1664, at La Trappe, the beginning of the celebrated Reform of that name. Armand-Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé who, the evening before, had received the abbatial blessing, began it with a modest community of ten monks. In spite of his desires he could not re-establish all our ancient usages, but he added other very austere practices and imprinted on his work a character of hard and severe penance, less inspired however by our first Cistercians than by the Fathers of the Desert, whose fervent disciple he was. If this reform encountered strong opposition, it also met warm sympathy. The Holy See approved it, on the 23 May of the year of

Grace 1678, or at least, to speak more correctly, praised it highly, and the Lord blessed it abundantly; in evil days, He entrusted to it the honour and the life of His Cistercian Order."

There is no emphasis in this great passage of liturgical majesty, but rather a certain sombre reserve, a discreet yet urgent care to mark the difference between the abbé de Rancé and the authentic representatives of the Cistercian tradition. They venerate the man whom God used to give the Order a second life, but they do not accept him, they make clear that they are not wholly his continuators. It is worth our while to listen to them, as they deftly pick out these *nuances* with as much penetration and firmness as pious delicacy.

His basic principle, writes Dom Anselme Le Bail, abbot of Chimay, was excellent: "but in its application, the abbé de Rancé was less fortunate or less well-served than Saint Alberic"—the most illustrious of the post-Bernardine rulers of Cîteaux. "For the employment of the time . . . he resumed the three great Benedictine works—the office, reading, manual work. Unhappily he did not attain the just balance of St Benedict and Cîteaux. Of the three, he tended to lengthen the office. Apart from that, in the matter of régime, austerity, silence, he inclined towards the practices of the early Fathers of the Desert. Yet the Reform remained fundamentally Cistercian. . . . What seems more serious is the *spirit*. The personal character of the Reformer, or perhaps the circumstances of the time impressed upon his work a tendency which, in the judgment of many, does not seem to be that of Cîteaux: that tendency is the dominant preoccupation with penance rather than with prayer—the preference given in the conduct of souls to the method of

the Fathers of the Desert over the Western discretion of St Benedict. Thus new currents were set up by the practice of accusations of faults not committed and by the exclusion of study properly so called, things which posterity has not ratified. . . . At that period, when the whole monastic tradition was obscured, a reaction was needed whose very violence might shock souls the better to wake them."

Understand clearly: the necessary and beneficent evolution which followed was not, most definitely not, a relaxation. Apart from a few details which we have already indicated, " it is not exactly ," writes another Trappist, Dom Serrant, " the actual rules of the Abbé de Rancé which can be taxed with excessive severity—they were observed right up to the Revolution, and even one of his successors, Dom de Lestrange, thought well to add new rigours, which have been followed in many houses for more than sixty years. Even now the two observances of the abbé de Rancé and the abbé de Lestrange, united together under the name of the Reformed Cistercian Order, follow a rule which, taken as a whole, exceeds in severity that which was adopted at La Trappe in the seventeenth century."

The change is not there. It is, as the illustrious Abbot of Chimay has just said, in the spirit animating these austerities, assigning them to their true end, and judging them in subordination to the primary and essential end of Cîteaux. Paradoxical as it may seem, our great monk had in his mind a confused or rather a superficial notion of what a monk is—over-simplified and, if I may say so, provincial or elementary—the idea which most outsiders have at the present day.

" As for the monastic congregations ", he wrote in his letter to Le Roi, " they are troops of criminals and public

penitents who, having failed in that fidelity which they owed to God and having angered him by their disobedience, can no longer claim his kindness till they have satisfied his justice by chastisements as great as their sins. They are prodigal sons . . . Christians who having in their weakness withdrawn from beneath the hand of God and made a bad use of his graces, have no other means of opening the gates of his mercy, save by putting themselves at his disposition —their hearts, warmly penetrated with the realisation of their crimes, must repair the ravages made in them by pride and disobedience. . . ."

It was not, as Rancé saw it, that only actual criminals were eligible for La Trappe, but that a just man " ceases to be considered as such the instant that he becomes a monk, and can now be regarded only as a sinner. . . . He loses his innocence on entering a monastery. . . . The cloister is a prison which makes criminals of those who have preserved their innocence as well as those who have lost it."

There you have very clearly marked that " dominant preoccupation with penance rather than prayer " in which Dom Le Bail saw a deviation from the true Cistercian spirit. The truth is that whatever their past lives may have been, our monks are *not* penitent criminals either in the eyes of God, or of the church or of themselves. They are contemplatives. Their practices of penance, like all the rest of their religious life, are " ordered towards contemplation and union with God," understanding by that (it is still Dom Le Bail speaking) " not a stage of prayer, but the dominant application of a soul to occupation with God alone, concentrating in this attention all the activity of its faculties, during its entire life, to the exclusion of exterior works. Now the principal means of producing this applica-

tion to God alone is prayer. Therefore to justify his title of Contemplative, the monk must make prayer the principal exercise of his life." Through this celestial breach, study, vainly exorcised by Rancé, returns to its place. "For most, books are the normal instrument of the voice of God." It should not be measured out drop by drop like a too powerful liqueur: "To have an enlightened spirituality, to see clear into all the things which are of God or which raise the soul to God, such is the ideal of the monk." Like manual labour, and with equal title, study is a work of religion. Prayer, reading, labour—"in these three works, the Cistercian monk is brought back unceasingly to unity, to the very end of his life: union with God as close and as sustained as is possible to have here below."

So dies the stupid but tenacious error which sees in La Trappe a sort of prison-hospital for the invalids of crime: a pure invention in which Rancé never ceased to take pleasure and which the most sensational of his *Relations* have managed to impose on the simple: the innocent, it would seem, could only enter La Trappe by the side door, their eyes lowered, a little ashamed of having murdered no one: the gallows-birds by the main-door, their heads well up and very much at home—for they had much less difficulty in taking themselves for "criminals". Heaven forbid that this house of mercy should have sent Dom Muce back to his regiment of Grenadiers or handed him over to the police. But these old prodigal sons were at all times the exception. The statistics leave us no doubt on the point: during the life of Rancé, against a handful of odd cases, there were a hundred monks from other religious orders and forty from the secular clergy. The high road to La Trappe, and the beaten road, was innocence. It was

amongst the young that it made its most characteristic conquests. They gave the tone—and the old who came to join them had to recapture the soul of youth. But all this is very far from Rancé—far, that is, from the man himself, but not from his providential mission. With one of his spiritual children, Dom Canivet, let us say in conclusion that "the work of the abbé de Rancé has come victorious through the test of time and great political convulsions. Two centuries and a half have passed and today, thanks to the Reform of the seventeenth century, three thousand monks and more than a thousand nuns still follow as their ideal the Cisterican life, cleansed of false growths and guided to a more developed spirituality, in the austerity of its primitive form."

That is sufficient reason why the Church should for ever bless the memory of Rancé, yet not sufficient reason why she should ever inscribe him in the roll of her saints. The Lord can use to His own ends a Cyrus, an Alexander, and a Rancé—but "He is not in the earthquake." *Non in commotione Dominus.*

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